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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 63, No. 3 AUGUST, 1956

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JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*

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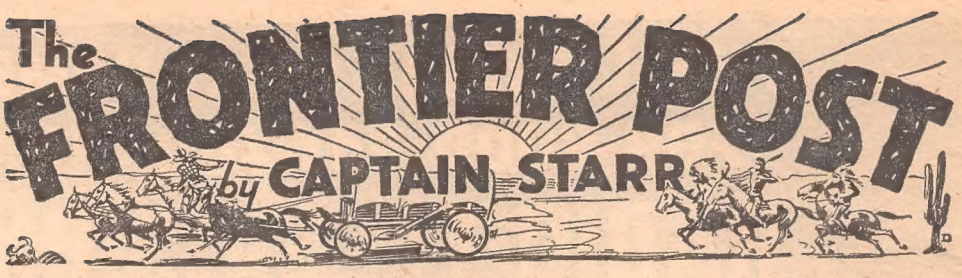


Rattler Roundup at Okeene, Oklahoma

ONE OF THE most interesting organizations west of the Mississippi is called the International Association of Rattlesnake Hunters, and according to the official certificate that is given to every bona fide member, it testifies to the fact that he has engaged in "the world's most hazardous hunting activity —catching man-killing rattlers alive."

There are more than 5,000 such persons, who meet every year at a designated hamlet in the center of Western Oklahoma's wheat and watermelon country for the annual convention. The big attracion, of course, is the nation's most unusual sporting event, the snake hunt. And it is unusual if a catch of 1,000 live snakes is not recorded.

Thriving Business

The night before the event there's a banquet and the main dish is, naturally, rattlesnake steak. Properly cooked, according to the people who have tried it, the taste is something similar to slightly bitter fish.

What happens to all the snakes that are caught? They are sold at from fifty to sixty cents per pound to professional snake dealers in Oklahoma City, who have a hard time supplying a sufficient amount to zoos, carnivals and canneries. Over 50,000 pounds annually are disposed of in this way.

One reason why this business is so thriving is because a rattler can't be raised commercially. He'll eat nothing but rabbit meat which is prohibitively expensive, and even when he gets it, the ornery creature will, chances are, starve himself to death because it doesn't taste just right.

Besides, its much more fun to hunt snakes out in the wilds than to raise them tamely according to the hunters from some twenty-odd states who descend on Okeene, Oklahoma, every springtime of the year. And it is surprising to note that the crowd includes not only the usual rough-and-ready Western hombre, but also dainty college gals in fancy jeans, plus entire ranch families, most of whom regard it as on an ordinary, everyday excursion.

When the hunt is on, they divide into groups of perhaps six or eight members to try their catching luck. "But the catching part is easy," most members testify. "It's the first brush with a snake that is—er—kinda, scarey."

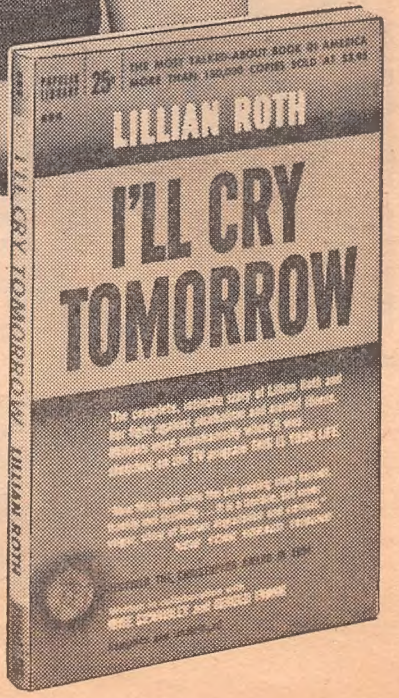
Final Tally

Once they're caught and brought back, in big sacks, the handlers gingerly take them out and weigh them one by one. The scale is set on top of a truck platform at the town's main intersection, so that each hunter can receive his fifty cents per pound while the crowd presses round and applauds the bigger specimens. They're measured carefully, too, because the longest wins a prize. A winner might measure as much as sixty inches.

Just in case you're ever out this way, and catch one for yourself, here's a recipe that's recommended for the choicest of eating, by Mrs. Johnny Walker, who is the official cook for the annual banquet of the International Association:

"Take a snake that's still alive. Chop off its head. After its cooled real good (which takes about three days), skin it (the hide comes off easy), and slice the carcass just the way you would a loaf of bread. Each piece should be about an inch in thickness. Dip these in flour and season with salt and pepper, then fry in deep fat until a golden brown. Make's right fancy eating."

Susan Hayward, star of "I'll Cry Tomorrow"



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LOOT of the

DIABLOS

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

With men who killed and killed again for half a map to buried gold,

the Lone Wolf knew his own life was worth but the cost of a bullet

PROLOGUE

THE BURNT hills danced before Captain Ramon Rendano y Spada's sweat-blurred eyes. They were all around him, humped against the brassy sky; they hemmed him in with remorseless cruelty, each barren, rocky hill like the last he had traversed, like the one ahead. The clang of his big white stallion's hoofs on gravel was a tiny sound, dying out against those changeless, savage hills.

Ramon paused. He was a huge man, standing almost seven feet tall in his boots. Despite the punishing heat he still wore his burnished breastplate, his plumed helmet,

his mesh-backed gauntlets, the insignia of his rank in the Spanish royal guard.

Behind him two horses, laden with treasure chests, hung weary heads, glad of the respite. His mount, which he had been leading these last miles, was an Arabian, pure-blooded, sure-footed, used to desert heat. But even the Arabian was tired.

Captain Spada was lost. He had been lost for a long time now.

He had made a big circle, trying to reach the valley where New Spain had established a small outpost village—a town called Agua Dolce. Somewhere on the other side of these savage hills marked by earlier explorers as *Los Diablos.*

But as he looked back over the trackless path he had come, Captain Spada had the sinking feeling he wouldn't make it. His squinting, bloodshot eyes made out no movement against those grim rises behind him; but he knew they were there. And he knew they would be on him before this day was done. He could feel it deep in his weary, giant frame.

INSTINCTIVELY he dropped his sweaty palm over his scabbarded blade. Under his crested iron helmet his face was gaunt, turned almost black by the pitiless sun. His eyes, black and unafraid, held a cold insolence as he surveyed that seemingly empty land.

"Por nada," he muttered, and laughed aloud in that sun-beaten stillness. All for nothing. Maria was dead; there was little hope that his son, Carlos, would ever know what had happened to his father and mother. Or ever get to benefit from the fortune that father now had in those chests.

The heat waves danced on those hills and formed images. Staring, Captain Spada seemed to see those red devils come charging down again on the satin-lined coach, and his own harsh command made its soundless echo in his dry throat. Twelve against a hundred. And when it was over Maria and her two servants were dead and he alone remained of the escorting guard—he and the treasure.

The red devils, badly mauled, had drawn off to lick their wounds and regroup. And it was then he had loaded the chests onto the two remaining horses out of the team of six and headed for the hills.

The scene danced with unreal insistence on the rocky slants; he saw the arrow in Maria's throat and he felt the sickness hit him again, sapping at his will to live. To what avail,

"Por nada," he repeated softly, then straightened as a surge of anger welled up in him. He shook his clenched iron fist to the brooding emptiness.

He started onward again. The sun was lowering. It was on his left side, burning-hot still. His armor weighed heavily; but he wore it with a perverse stubborness that had its basis in a grim need. The breastplate, the helmet and the big, two-edged sword were all that remained to him of a way of life a thousand years gone by, it seemed. These, and the big white stallion.

He reached up to stroke the dust-grayed, drooping head.

He went on, stride by stride, a giant of a man made diminutive by the uncaring, changeless hills. He was a symbol then of the iron will and savage energy with which the Conquistadores had tramped through the burning desolation of the New World; but he was already doomed; his fate was sealed.

A shoulder of black rock forced him to veer to the west, into the sun, and a long shadow fell across his path.

He stared up with narrowed, wondering gaze. A great stone peak was humped up into the track of the sun. Against the glare behind it that peak seemed an etching in black rock. An etching of a man on horseback—vaguely like that of General Juan Castrillo whose statue was in the square in Madrid.

It was a landmark, but it prodded no sense of familiarity in the Captain. He lowered his gaze and went on. A narrow slit in the wall of stone opened up on his right; he would have ignored it if his cayuse hadn't pricked its ears and whin-

nied softly.

Captain Spada tugged on the bit reins with tired impatience. But the animal kept veering toward the narrow gap in the shouldering wall. Finally, Spada gave in and let the animal lead him.

The narrow canyon doubled back and forth as though some catacylsmic fault had pulled this ridge of black rock apart eons ago and it had split unevenly.

On the last bend Captain Spada heard the sound of water falling! The stallion picked up its gait and the laden animals behind whickered eagerly, lifting their tired heads.

They emerged into a small box canyon, an area entirely enclosed by towering rock walls. And here Captain Spada paused, staring with mouth agape at the sight of the fall.

IT SEEMED to come out of a giant crack in the opposite wall, to fall forty feet into a small pool. The overflow made a glinting stream which ran the length of the small canyon and disappeared into another crack in the ground. There was grass in the canyon, bushes lined the creek—and a lone, towering palm, its seed dropped by some unknown winged carrier a thousand miles from where palms thrived.

Captain Spada brushed his hand over his eyes. The scene was as bizarre as it was unexpected.

But it was a good place in which to die. . . .

He made his preparations carefully, knowing that his attackers would be on him before the sun faded entirely from the sky. It was always at sundown that they came, wild, leaping, yelling.

He made a careful survey of the area around the fall and found a deep crevice in the rock beyond it. He lowered the treasure chests inside. All but a handful of gold coins, a gold cross, and a string of matched pearls. These he put inside a soft buckskin purse. Then, building a small fire and using the tip of his knife, he laboriously but painstakingly burned into a piece of soft hide a carefully detailed map of this box canyon and the treasure's hiding place. Of the trail from the point where the coach had been attacked to this canyon he was necessarily vague, as was his positioning of the valley of the Copperhead and the town of Agua Dolce for which he had been headed.

He made prominent, however, the landmark which he called Mounted General Peak.

JIM HATFIELD

Then he wrote:

With the sun at my back, the black mountain from which the river falls looks like an old crone bent over a cauldron. To the right is a slender gray peak much like an inverted icicle. The canyon here is the only bit of green in these black hills —it is like a piece of jade dropped by the hand of God.

He finished his description and tucked

it into the buckskin pouch, with directions to whoever found it to contact his son, Carlos, living with his brother in Vera Cruz. He stuffed the buckskin pouch into his saddle-bag.

He had little hope that the stallion would ever find its way back. As near as he could judge he was more than a hundred miles from any habitation.

He let the stallion crop hungrily at the grass beyond the palm. When the sun was quite low he led the animal back to the canyon entrance and slaped it roughly across the rump.

"*Vaya con Dios,*" he murmured.

They came as he had known they would, when the sun was gone out of the canyon and only a bright aquamarine streak tinted the western sky. The painted savages of this new world. Feathered and yelling and waving stone hatchets and kneeling to let their feathered arrows fly.

He fought them off into darkness, a grim giant of a man with a naked blade that severed through muscles and bone at those who became emboldened and closed in to finish him. He fought until the arrows which had found root in legs and thigh and arm drained away his strength and his iron will to live. And when he fell it was like some giant oak finally crashing down to rest.

The warriors of Madoac let him lie. They counted their dead, their dying and their wounded and in grudging tribute they let him lie as he had fallen, sword in hand, armor breastplate shielding his mighty chest. His helmet had been torn loose as he had fallen and had rolled some distance away. They brought it back and set it down beside his gray-streaked head.

They were not interested in treasure, these naked savages. Nor were they yet interested in horses. They made no attempt to track down the big white stallion —and they left the other two horses alone.

They had accomplished what they had set out to do—to kill the last of the white intruders into their country. They were satisfied. They left the canyon at dawn and never returned.

More than one hundred years later that treasure and that canyon, now a part of Texas, was to affect the lives of the descendants of Captain Spada, and draw Ranger Jim Hatfield, the Lone Wolf, to the valley of the Copperhead. . . .

CHAPTER I

"No Friend of Mine!"

THE Mexican on the faltering black horse cast a desperate look over his shoulder.

"*El Diablo!*" he said harshly, and fear danced in his black-button eyes and drew sharp lines across his weary, bone-gaunted face.

He was racing the black toward the narrowing head of a small valley, for the temporary safety of the dark portal in the night-shrouded hills. In the moonlight his flight, and that of his pursuer, were like the flitting of mounted ghosts across a bare stage.

Behind him a tall, wide-shouldered rider on a powerful golden stallion was closing the gap between them.

Vittorio Mareno's breathing was frantic. He was a chunky, long-jawed man dressed as a Mexican vaquero, but the clothes were rumpled and soiled now from the long, desperate run from the Border. His big sombrero flopped on his back, held there by a rawhide thong around his sinewy throat.

If only he could make the safety of the canyon mouth!

But the man behind him was closing the gap with each faltering stride of his own hammer-headed mare. There was something as inexorable as death in the grim persistence of that big mounted figure who seemed to need no sleep, and could follow a trail where there was none.

Other men could have told Vittorio that his conjecture was right. Jim Hatfield, whom men spoke of many times as the Lone Wolf of the Rangers, seemed to live and have his being, to order his life by

supersensory impression.

Mareno cursed. Why had he consented to split up with his partner? *Why?* Why had not the big devil on that tireless golden stallion turned to follow *El Cascabel* instead? The question, unanswerable to him, was like a burning prod.

The temporary safety of the dark canyon loomed close now; around him were boulders shaken loose from the rocky hills and scattered with careless abandon at this end of the valley. He was less than a hundred yards away when he died.

Mareno was looking back over his shoulder when he felt the mare step into a hole, heard the brittle snapping of bone as the animal stumbled. He tried to slip free, but his right foot skidded through the stirrup in his haste, and then it was too late.

The mare took a header, and Mareno flipped over his head. Then eight hundred pounds of horseflesh came down on him.

The black was threshing weakly when Jim Hatfield pulled Goldy aside and slid out of saddle.

Mareno lay partially under the struggling black animal, crumpled and broken, one hand outstretched, fingers curled, as if he were still reaching for something he would never get.

Hatfield's hand came up with a big Peacemaker. The report made its crashing, echoing sound in the small valley.

The black's head dropped. The Ranger, whose Lone Wolf sobriquet had long ago been given him by his own superior officer, Ranger Captain Bill McDowell, who had in this way honored his top Ranger who so often performed wonders of law enforcement work entirely on his own, eyed the body of the man lying under the dead black mare. That hand with its curled fingers interested him. He crouched beside the mare and picked up Mareno's lifeless wrist.

It was a bony, tendoned wrist and forearm, unmarked save for a whitish scar near the elbow, probably a memento of some bygone knife duel.

The big Ranger hunkered there beside that still figure, knowing with a bitter taste in his mouth that he had guessed wrong at a parting of the trails this morning. The man he had wanted must have gone free!

Behind him Goldy blew noisily and shook his head; gear jingled in the stillness.

Hatfield ignored the stallion. He was giving all his attention to staring down at the limp figure who, with his partner, the Lone Wolf had trailed for four hundred twisting, torturous miles into this desolate country close to the New Mexican border. He was looking down at Mareno, but he was thinking back to how it had all started. . . .

ON ONE of his rare vacations, Jim Hatfield had gone down to El Paso to visit an old friend. He had arrived in time to see that friend, Bob Thorpe, town marshal, die.

Thorpe had still been alive when the Ranger had walked into his bedroom. A prematurely white-haired man of thirty, Hatfield remembered him as a man with an easy smile, laughing blue eyes, and an honesty that had remained unshakable in the face of myriad temptations in this tough Mexican border town.

The best marshal El Paso had ever had, the *Courier* had mourned in its front-page epitaph.

The best husband a woman had ever had, May Thorpe had said brokenly. Bob Thorpe had been shot twice and then, with senseless savagery, his killer had slashed a gruesome X across his face. Either of the two bullets in the lawman would have killed him; he had died six hours later. The knife wounds had been an unnecessary bit of cruelty that had brought a grim, unrelenting light to Jim Hatfield's eyes.

Thorpe had been flickering on the edge of death when Hatfield stood beside him. The doctor had shaken his head and taken May away.

Thorpe's eyes had been closed, could barely be seen through the bandages crisscrossing his face. The Ranger had stood by the bed, watching the slow rise and fall of his friend's chest.

When Bob Thorpe had opened his eyes for a last look at life strangely in that moment he had recognized Jim Hatfield's tall figure. A faint fire had stirred in him and temporarily washed the pain away—at least in that last moment his eyes had been terribly clear.

"Jim! You came! May will need—"

Hatfield had bent over the dying man. Only one thing he could do for Bob now.

"Who was it, Bob?"

"Don't know—making my rounds—saw something in Izzie's. Shadows. Was shot before I knew—" His voice died away and the Ranger thought he was gone. But the bright look was still in Bob's eyes when he'd opened them again and summoned the last of his fading strength.

"Saw only arm of coyote who used—knife. Right arm—tattoo of a coiled copperhead. He was—was laughing. . . ." Bob Thorpe's hand had come part way to his face. Then it dropped. But his eyes remained open, blue and intense for a moment longer—before the intenseness faded, as though a lamp had gone out behind them.

There had not been much more than that to go on. Questioning revealed that a young Mexican, a stranger in El Paso, had awakened Izzie and his wife in their quarters above Izzie's Mart, a combination pawn and second-hand shop. The wife, who had remained upstairs, said the young Mexican showed her husband a letter and they went down into the shop together. Some while later she had heard shots.

The strange part of the story was that Izzie and the young Mexican had been found in the shop, dead. But both had been killed by a knife.

The almost hysterical woman identified the Mexican as the one who had come to their bedroom—no one in El Paso recognized the body. Nor had a letter been found on him, or on Izzie.

Articles had not been disturbed in the store, an odd, poorly lighted hole-in-the-wall piled high with junk, with a thousand shoddy, ancient articles. Old saddlebags, crockery, furniture—jetsam of the Border country—to be pawed and rummaged through by the poor of El Paso.

But there had been something at Izzie's place that the young Mexican had wanted—and that the killers had found. *What?*

IT WAS a question that asked itself again in the Lone Wolf's grim thoughts as he now hunkered beside Mareno's body.

He had questioned a dozen men that night, and had pinned his hunch to an old woodcutter who had seen two men, dark shapes on horseback, headed upriver. One had been riding a black mare; the other a roan or bay, he thought, but wasn't sure.

A long chance on a cold trail, for it wasn't until morning that Jim Hatfield had learned any of this. But it had panned out. For two days now he had known he was on the right trail.

He bent over the crumpled killer again, tugged the body free of the mare's weight, and went through the dead man's clothing.

Around Mareno's neck was the leather thong holding his sombrero. There also was a softer cord attached to a small pouch hidden under his clothes—a small, sachet-like affair which many of the superstitious wore to ward off the evil spirits of sickness. Usually such an amulet smelled to high heaven.

Hatfield slipped the pouch over Mareno's head.

About him the silences hung heavy. Right now this small valley seemed as remote and uninhabited as the craters of the moon. Mareno had died two jumps from a cluster of rocks, detritus from the higher valley walls which made their pattern of light and shadow in the moonlight.

Goldy suddenly lifted his head and stared, ears pricked forward, into the blackness of the canyon mouth.

Hatfield came to his feet, frowning. "See something, Goldy?" he asked softly.

The big sorrel remained alert, eyeing the shadows.

Hatfield shrugged. Some animal, he thought. . . .

He pulled the drawstrings loose and reached inside the pouch. His hand touched a coin and a piece of soft leather.

He drew out both.

The gold coin glinted in the moonlight. It was an ancient coin, struck by a mint in Spain. But the ragged piece of hide caught his attention more.

Frowning, he dropped the coin into the pouch and spread the leather out in his hands. He made out what seemed to be faint tracings of a map, burned long ago into the hide. It was very old, that map—yet as he studied it he could see that it had been recently cut with a sharp knife.

The Lone Wolf's eyes narrowed with sudden understanding. There had been two men in Izzie's that night, this one and the one he wanted most—the one with the tattoo on his right forearm. The man who had slashed Bob Thorpe.

Evidently they had slit the map in two, hoping to salvage that much of it at least, if one or the other was overtaken.

Hatfield turned his half of the map over in his fingers. This, then, was what the killers had been after in Izzie's—

The voice that made its sharp intrusion into his bitter speculation then was crisp and definite in the brooding stillness.

"Señor, you have gazed too long on what is mine!"

Hatfield stiffened. His regard lifted from the piece of hide in his hand to the direction from which the voice came—to a dimly perceived figure in the deep shadow of the nearby rocks. A wide-brimmed Mexican sombrero hid most of the speaker's face, and the Ranger had an impression only of a slender figure clad somewhat like the dead man at his feet, and the more definite realization that the muzzle of a carbine was regarding him with unwavering stare.

Somewhere among those brooding shadows and rocks Hatfield sensed another man, but only the one with the rifle was apparent in the shadows. The voice, going on, was crisper now.

"Señor, you have but one choice to make. To live, or to die!"

JIM HATFIELD'S smile held a thin reluctance. The proposition was put coldly and definitely and he sensed his choice was real. But he merely shrugged and lifted his hands above shoulder level.

"An easy choice to make," he conceded. "You a friend of his?" He toed the dead man.

"Vittorio Mareno is no friend of mine," the shadowy rifleman disclaimed. "I am not concerned that he is dead." The voice sharpened as the Ranger took a step forward. "Stay where you are, señor! It is the pouch I am after—only the pouch. And that map you hold in your hand. Put it inside the pouch and toss it to me!"

That this was meant to be a distraction the Lone Wolf realized too late. Whoever the unseen companion of the rifleman was, he moved as stealthily as a prowling coyote. Hatfield was tossing the pouch to the slender figure among the rocks when he caught the blur of movement at his side.

He whirled in time to glimpse the barrel of a carbine arc down toward his head. The impact dented his hat and crumpled him to his knees. His hand closed about the butt of his Colt and through the shock of pain he seemed to hear a far-away, high-pitched voice shrill:

"No! Do not kill him!"

Then the rifle barrel must have come down on his head again for he heard nothing more, nor was he aware of pain.

CHAPTER II

Cibo Gallo

STRAIGHT as an arrow, the canyon trail led the Lone Wolf to the back door of Copperhead Valley. It was the way Vittorio Mareno had been headed; it was the trail taken by the two men who had waited at the canyon entrance, knowing that Mareno would be coming that way.

How they knew, the Lone Wolf could only guess. He figured to find an answer to that question when he met up with them again.

It was a trail for goats and for burros.

and it seemed to end at the rim of a hundred foot fall-off. Below the big Ranger began the narrow tail of the Copperhead and from where he stood he could see, a dozen miles away, the pale adobe blocks of a town glinting in the early sun. And though he had never been here Jim Hatfield knew this place; knew that the only town in the Copperhead was an old, old town and that it was still called Agua Dolce—Sweetwater.

Behind him and around the Diablos lifted their black heads, quartzite reflecting a thousand spears of light. They were a No-Man's land between Texas and New Mexico and ran south into Chihuahua.

Jim Hatfield first saw the Copperhead Valley in the early morning when the sun was still a cool red orb staining the dour hills. He saw it at the best time.

It was well past noon when he finally came down off the Black Wall and rode on into Agua Dolce.

He was a tall, dust-covered figure riding—a beard-stubbled, unprepossessing figure in saddle. His hat had saved him from a cut scalp, but the rifle-barrel had raised two nasty lumps over his right ear, and his head still ached with dull insistence.

He came into Agua Dolce leading Goldy. He had pried off the big stallion's left hind shoe and thrown it away into the brush. This he did as an excuse for stopping in the town, since the impression he wanted to create was that of a wanted man who would have preferred avoiding humanity had he not needed a horseshoe. To the casual observer he was just a stranger in from the wider reaches of the Copperhead—on his way, obviously, to the dubious sanctuary of the Diablos.

He came in along the south trail, although he knew that neither the direction of his approach nor the horseshoe ruse would fool the man he was after for long.

He came first to the Spada hacienda, enclosed by a high adobe wall. But even if he had known that this was the home of Furillo Spada, that would not have meant anything to him.

The trail paralleled the ancient wall and the sun lay aslant it, beating back in yellow glare. There were cracks in the wall, some old and patched and some recent and unrepaired. Strange trees leaned over the wall as he walked by. On the other side of that high enclosure someone was playing a sad, lilting tune on a piano. He listened to the quick run of notes and the trailing chord of sadness—it seemed to hold still in the heated afternoon with its echo of haunting despair.

The piano notes faded as he walked on. At length he came to the end of the wall. It cornered here and ran for a hundred yards off to his right and he saw a big arched gate in the middle of it, closed and giving a sense of stern aloofness.

The Ranger paused. The gate faced the town, a half-mile away on a sloping trail, and over the town a wall of granite cast its heavy shadow.

Once the town had been servile to this big hacienda which had dominated the valley and Agua Dolce with paternal sternness. Now circumstances had forced the hacienda into impotent aloofness—and Agua Dolce, like a child turned free of parental authority, was feeling its oats.

That was the impression Jim Hatfield got before he even entered Agua Dolce.

The road brought him through the litter of back alleys and small hovels flanking it, the bawling of goats and children, and the strident voices of harried women. He passed rows of seraped figures crouched and dozing along the shaded walls, then came to the wider section that opened to the plaza.

THE afternoon shadows stretched long across the plaza. He paused here, searching the building line. There was an air of seediness about the place, like an embittered woman who has given up fighting the erosion of time. There was little activity in the plaza and even the few children around the dried-up fountain had a furtive sort of play.

He was looking for signs of a blacksmith, for he had to have Goldy shod and lay his false trail. He saw no sign of such a shop in the plaza, but three dusty, slack-hipped horses nosing the tie-rack in front

of a cantina caught his interest.

They were the only horses in the plaza and they looked hard-ridden. One was a big bay.

He turned in that direction, his glance reaching up to the sign over the cantina. *El Toro Rojo*—the Red Bull. The sun had badly faded the letters and the glaring-eyed head of the bull under them.

The big Ranger was close to the short flight of wooden stairs when he heard commotion inside the cantina. A man yelled harshly, and there was the sound of a quick scuffle. Then the batwings banged open and a man tumbled out. He rolled like a cat and came to his feet. The Ranger's hand clamped down on the back of his neck as he started to leap away.

As he twisted to look up into Hatfield's hard face, a golden, looped earring he wore flashed in the late sun. He was a strange figure—bare-chested, bronzed, crouched like some golden cat. Muscles rippled across his back and chest as he yelled harshly, and there was the sound ly from the man who had assisted him to the cantina doors.

He was barefoot and wearing a pair of ragged brown corduroy trousers set off by a bright red sash encircling his narrow waist. And the grin he gave Hatfield was insolently disarming.

A raw-boned man in range clothing pushed through the batwings and brought up short, a dark anger staining his face. His right hand dropped to the handle of his gun, his left went up to wipe at the trickle of blood at his mouth corner.

"I'll teach you, you slippery thief, to lift my purse!"

The bare-chested young fellow lifted up a small buckskin pouch. "A few pesos, señor," he said insolently. "For a few pesos the big Señor Stevens would argue?"

"I'm not arguin'!" the big rancher snarled. He ducked his head as the young fellow flung the pouch at him. His hand jerked his Colt free of leather and levelled.

Hatfield's right hip exploded into gunsmoke. Stevens' Colt dropped.

"You're pretty good, kid," Jim said, "but not quite good enough."

There was a moment of dead silence while Stevens stared at his numbed hand. Then the doors behind him opened and two hardcases, evidently his companions, moved out to side him. They had their hands on their gun butts, but they stopped abruptly as they looked down into Jim Hatfield's levelled muzzle. The look in the big Ranger's strange green eyes was not reassuring.

"Easy," he warned softly. He looked at Stevens. "I reckon you've got cause to give the kid a swift boot where he needs it most. But a bullet—"

He turned, sensing something in Stevens' sneering gaze. The kid was gone. The plaza was empty save for a huge, resplendent figure in brilliant uniform hurrying toward them. The man waved a gun as he ran.

Stevens worked the fingers of his numbed hand; the Ranger's bullet had wrenched his gun from it but hadn't touched his hand.

"You damn meddling fool!" he flung at Hatfield. "I'll settle with you later!" He bent, picked up the pouch and his Colt and snarled to his companions, "Come on, we'll finish that bottle we came in for."

JIM HATFIELD stood by the cantina steps, waited for the bizarre character in the bright-hued uniform, now waving his pistol, to reach him. The man was holding a Dragoon Model sixgun with a six-inch barrel. He carried it clumsily but with determination.

"Señor," he said, puffing a little, "you will put your pistola away, no?"

Hatfield looked him over. He looked like a newspaper caricature of a Mexican general—a heavy-paunched man in a brass-buttoned uniform of green and gold and scarlet braid. But on his chest, instead of medals, he wore a polished badge lettered simply: *Policia.*

He was a comical figure with sad brown eyes and a round oily dark face graced by a pair of drooping black mustachios. He went on sadly, "I am Cibo Gallo, señor. I am the law in Agua Dolce." He sighed heavily. "You have, I theenk, disturbed this law. You will come with me—please?"

Hatfield smothered an impulse to laugh. The man looked so comically helpless, so ridiculous, that the Lone Wolf wondered how long he had been tolerated in this tough town.

But the man evidently was the law, such as it was. "I was only trying to stop a killing—" Hatfield began.

"We will talk about it," Cibo said earnestly. He cast a quick, nervous glance toward the cantina. "I do not wish for more trouble." He made a motion with his Dragoon. "Your *pistola,* senor!"

Jim slid his Colt into holster and turned to pick up Goldy's reins. "My horse, Senor Gallo—he threw a shoe, back on the trail. I am in need of a blacksmith."

"Pablo is a fine blacksmith," Cibo interrupted hastily. "His shop is but a stone's throw from my office." He motioned across the plaza.

Half amused, the Ranger allowed himself to be taken into custody. He walked slightly ahead of the fat man, leading Goldy, his shadow long across the square. Following directions, he turned into a narrow side street and came out to a narrow road flanked by the rock-strewn slope of the ridge. This road went on past the building line to become a brown trail curling over the ridge.

The blacksmith shop was a narrow, open-fronted adobe structure pushed up against the slope. A sagging pole corral held two wagons in various stages of disrepair and a lone gray mule staring forlornly at them over the bars.

Pablo, a gnome of a man with bulging shoulders, eyed Goldy with shrewd inventory.

"*Muy magnifico caballo,*" he grunted. "*Si, señor,* a shoe trued and weighted to match the others."

Hatfield left Goldy at the smith's and crossed the street to Gallo's law office. It was another adobe, facing the ridge trail, but was an out-of-the-way place for the law to have quarters, the Ranger thought.

Cibo Gallo pushed the door and waved him in, following quickly, moving lightly

for so big a man who seemed to puff so hard at the slightest exertion.

Hatfield stopped by the desk and eyed the barred windows. With the ridge shadowing the building, it was almost dark inside the office. There was an odor of stale sweat in the room and he had an idea the place was seldom ventilated.

He had been taken here as Cibo's prisoner, but felt no sense of urgency. If the the time came for it, he had but to show this man his Ranger badge and explain why he had come here. But some inner caution held him to the rôle he had determined upon.

HATFIELD put his right foot on a chair and drew paper and tobacco from his shirt pocket. Cibo closed the door, came to the desk in the center of the room, and lay his Dragoon on it. The man unbuttoned his braided coat, revealing a hairy chest, and sighed with relief.

He scratched himself absently. "You are a stranger here, no?"

Hatfield shrugged. "Is that unusual?"

Gallo sighed. "It is not. Sometimes men come to Agua Dolce whose busines is their own. They never stay long. But, you understand, there are questions I must ask." His voice was apologetic. He mopped his forehead with a big red handkerchief.

Hatfield cupped a match to his cigarette. "Just so long as they aren't too personal," he admitted.

Gallo smiled. "I am just a poor policeman," he said. "I am paid little. The sheriff, he is the beeg man, señor. But he is in Valerio, seventy miles away. He cares little for my troubles. Sometimes he sends a deputy to Agua Dolce—mostly he comes only to collect the county taxes." He sighed deeply, spread his hands. "Always the taxes, eh, señor? It was better, I assure you, when Don Furillo collected the taxes. The Spadas, at least, used to help the poor people of Agua Dolce. But now they, too, have fallen upon evil times."

"The Spadas?"

"*Si.* The beeg hacienda on the edge of town, señor. You could not have missed it, if you came from the south."

Hatfield nodded. "I saw it. Looks like it's going to pot."

"To pot?" Gallo's eyes rolled. "Ah, yes—the way you put it. The Spadas are a proud family. They trace their line back to the Spadas of Spain, señor. One, a Ramon Spada, he was a *Capitan* in the royal guard here before—no offense, señor—this land became a part of the glorious state of Texas."

Impatience tugged at the Lone Wolf. The paunchy officer was a garrulous sort. He could waste the remainder of the afternoon here.

But Gallo's voice, rambling on, hit a note that brought a sharp interest to Hatfield.

"He left a treasure, señor. This Capitan Spada. No doubt you heard of it—the treasure of the Diablos?"

The Ranger shook his head. "There are many stories of treasure buried in the hills, Cibo."

"Ah, but this one is real, señor. There was a map, but long ago it was lost. The Spadas were given a land grant here—once it took in all this valley and the mountains around. But little by little they lost or sold portions of it until now they have little left. So they search for the treasure of their ancestor."

Hatfield cut in bluntly, "How come the Spadas never found it, if there was such a treasure and a map?"

Gallo lifted his huge shoulders. "I can repeat only the stories, señor, stories that run like goats among the hills." He guffawed at his own rhetoric. "There was a map in a pouch, a map burned on soft leather. A pearl necklace, a gold cross and some coins. So the stories say. The map got lost—some servant stole it. In the many years there have been tales of many men who have searched for the treasure of the Diablos without finding it."

Hatfield had a mental image of the pouch he had taken from Mareno—the gold coin, the section of soft leather with detailed tracings burned into it.

It could be a fake. There were a thousand tales along the Border about buried treasure. But two men, at least, had be-

lieved in it enough to kill for it.

One of them was a man with a tattoo on his forearm!

HE SAID casually, "I am not interested in treasure, Cibo. I have come to Agua Dolce for other reasons. I do not expect to stay."

Gallo's dark eyes seemed to lose themselves behind huge wrinkles. "You are wise, señor. But now the questions I must ask. Who are you? Why are you here?"

The Ranger dropped his butt on the floor and ground his heel on it. "The name is of no matter—but you can call me Jim. My business here? None. I came—shall we say—because I had little choice."

Cibo Gallo allowed himself another survey of this tall, broad-shouldered dusty man with a dark beard stubble roughening his features. The guns in holsters thonged down low on his hips proclaimed his business; Cibo had glimpsed a demonstration of this man's abilities in the plaza. And the bleakness in those strange green eyes precluded further questioning.

He smothered his own irritation and asked mildly, "You had trouble with the Señor Stevens. I was in the lunchroom, across the plaza, and did not see it all. But—are you a friend of Tarini?"

"Who?"

"The gypsy boy. A thief and a trouble-maker, that one." Gallo put his palms to the sides of his head and rocked it. "Such a—a wild one. He belongs nowhere—he is everywhere. I am amazed, señor, each day he is not killed."

"Perhaps I should have kept my nose out of it," Hatfield admitted drily. "But I saw that he was unarmed, and not much more than a boy—and this man, Stevens, would have shot him. I acted without thinking, Cibo."

Gallo shrugged. "You did not know, señor. But this gypsy—some day I will catch him and put him behind bars and I will throw the key away."

Both heard footsteps grate just outside the closed door. There was a long pause, then the door flew open without benefit of knock.

CHAPTER III

"All Gone—Dead!"

AROUND-SHOULDERED half-breed who entered the office pulled up short, balancing himself on the balls of his feet. A thin brown beard stubbled his gaunt cheeks and narrow jaw. Gray eyes with a mongoloid slant surveyed Jim Hatfield in quick surprise. Then a yellow flame seemed to flare up in their depths and his lids drooped.

He lifted his right thumb and pushed his big hat back from his low, sweat-caked forehead; his voice was thinly apologetic.

"I did not know you had company, Cibo."

Gallo's black eyes seemed lost in the wrinkles. "You have no manners, Felipe—" He turned to his prisoner with more apology in his tone. "You'll pardon him, señor. Felipe DeCastro. He works for me."

Felipe's eyes were lazy slits as he surveyed the big Ranger. "I apologize if I have intruded, señor." But his tone was thinly insolent; it held a smear of enmity.

Jim Hatfield looked him over. A lean-shanked, sinewy man who seemed to exude a restless vitality, an enmity against the world, a bold and challenging arrogance. He wore a gun on his left hip and a knife in his boot and he looked as though he had traveled far and hard and the stain of that journey was on him.

Suspicion raked cold fingers through the Ranger. His voice had a bleak thrust to it. "You were in a hurry, Felipe. Have you been away from Agua Dolce?"

The man shrugged. "I was down in the valley," he admitted. "On law business."

"I see no badge on your vest," Hatfield cut in coldly.

Felipe's hand lifted to his vest, fell away. "Everyone in town knows me, stranger. I need no badge." He turned back to Gallo then, remembering what he had come to say to him.

"There is a rider coming down the ridge trail, Cibo. I saw him as I came here. I think he is the Cabot boy."

Gallo stiffened. Jim Hatfield saw hardness settle over this big man like a cloak. A thick arm shot out and swept the Dragoon from the desk, thrust it into holster. There was nothing clumsy in the motion, nor in the way Gallo turned.

"You will excuse me, señor," he said, his smile cold on his face. "I have a little business. Perhaps, if you are still in town tomorrow—" there was an edge to the question that might have been a threat—"I shall talk with you again."

He was at the door then, stepping out. Hatfield took a stride after him.

Felipe's voice was soft, purring. "I would not interfere, señor." He was standing with his back against the wall, watching.

"You intend to stop me?" the Ranger asked curtly.

"It would not be advisable," the man evaded. "I have been away, down valley. I do not know you. I am a suspicious man, señor—one becomes so, in my business." His smile was only the working of his mouth muscles. "You have business in Agua Dolce?"

"My own," Hatfield answered grimly.

There was a hush outside in the street. He did not hear Gallo, but sound made by a rider came into that darkening law office. The Ranger was being kept out of what was soon to happen out there—he didn't like it.

He took a long step toward the door and Felipe straightened. The man's eyes widened abruptly and his hand fell away from his Colt. He stared at the gun in Hatfield's hand. "You are quick with the draw, señor," he said grudgingly.

"Keep your hand away from your gun!" Hatfield snapped, "and no one will get hurt!"

He went through the doorway in time to see Cibo Gallo step out into the street and wait for the rider to pull up ahead of him.

The street shadows were long, but there was clarity to the scene. He heard Felipe move restlessly in the office, stepped away from the doorway, and leaned his weight against the blank adobe wall.

THE rider pulled up, swaying in saddle. He seemed either very tired, or he was hurt. Behind him the ridge trail was like a boy's tracking of a stick through brown dust. The stillness had a weightless quality.

He gave the impression of being young, but his face was shadowed by his hat and being somewhat slumped gave him a look of age. His tone was blurred in the stillness broken only by the ringing of Pablo's hammer down the street.

"Gone! All gone—dead. . . Damn you, Cibo!"

Cibo's voice cut through then. His words, flung against the rider whose back was to the Ranger were too low for Hatfield to make them out. The meaning evaded him. But whatever Gallo said in reply galvanized the rider into movement. He stood up tall in saddle, his Colt making a brief glint as it came up.

Cibo's shot lifted him out of saddle. The man fell loosely, his Colt still clenched in his fist. Snorting, his horse shied away.

Gallo walked up to the man and stood for a brief moment over the body, watching until there was no more life in him. Then he turned away.

Felipe had come to the door; his cigarette made a thin point of light against his mouth as he pulled in smoke. Hatfield's glance picked up Pablo in the street, a hammer in his hand. After awhile Pablo walked back into his shop. The sound of his hammer seemed to beat a requiem as Gallo reached Jim Hatfield.

The Lone Wolf's tone was even. "Looks like he was on the prod about something, Gallo."

The huge officer lifted his shoulders. The deadliness had slipped like a cloak from him; he was again the comical fat cop of Agua Dolce.

"Name's Guy Cabot," he volunteered, his tone heavy, sorrowful. "He and his father, Raoul, own a small *rancho* in the valley, over the ridge. Last week he came

to town to complain of rustlers—demanded action." Gallo mopped his fat face. "I told him I was helpless. My jurisdiction does not extend beyond this town—besides, I am not much for riding, señor."

He glanced at the body in the street. Several brown-faced children from across the office were staring.

"He was drunk, then, señor. When he left he threatened me. So, when I saw him ride down the trail just now—" Gallo shrugged—"I tried to pacify him. But you saw him try to kill me."

It was a smooth explanation, but it sounded thin to Hatfield. Still, it was none of his business.

Felipe's voice rasped behind them. "I will get the undertaker, Cibo. It is not good to leave a body in the street."

The paunchy officer nodded. He mopped his face again. "If you will excuse me, señor, I think I will take a siesta." His eyes met the Rangers with cool amusement. "As for you, this is a warning I give, no more. In Agu Dolce I am the law. I want no trouble. It would be best if you were to be gone before the sun gets too high in the sky tomorrow."

Jim Hatfield's eyes were bleak. "Perhaps you are right, Cibo."

Pablo was standing by the forge, working a small bellows with his thick left arm when Jim Hatfield stopped in. The afternoon was fading fast; the shop looked gloomy. There was the acrid smell of burnt hoof in the air.

Pablo looked up as the broad-shouldered figure loomed in silhouette against the street. Pablo looked like some powerful gnome, cast from bronze, the glowing coals reddening his bared, muscled chest.

The Ranger said, "I've come for my bag, Pablo."

The blacksmith nodded. He pointed with a pair of tongs to Goldy, standing tethered to one side. "I shall be finished in a half-hour." There was a sullen touch to his tone that had not been there when the Ranger had brought Goldy in.

Hatfield eyed him with narrowing interest. The blacksmith seemed nervous; his glance shifted from the man before him to the shoe he was holding in the bed of coals.

The Ranger walked to Goldy who whickered eagerly and nuzzled his arm.

A RANGY roan with a blaze face and a white left forefoot stood off to one side, evidently waiting to be shod. The animal was dust-caked, sweaty. There was a tired droop to its head, its slack-hipped waiting. Yet it eyed Hatfield with sudden unfriendliness as the Ranger turned to him.

The animal, he reflected, had not been here when he had left Goldy. Not more than twenty minutes ago, he judged. He slipped the warbag from the big sorrel's saddle and slung it over his shoulder, turned then and took a step toward the roan.

The horse jerked its head against the halter rope and bared its teeth. Pablo came swiftly between them, still holding the tongs.

"Senor, he is *muy malo caballo*," he said hastily. "It is not wise to go too near to him."

"Who's animal is it?" Hatfield questioned. He was eying the brand burned on the animal's haunch. It could have been an S laid horizontally, or a snake track.

Pablo licked his thick lips and glanced to the front of his shop. "It belongs to the Spada remuda," he muttered. "It was left here only a few minutes ago."

Hatfield looked down at the roan's unshod hooves. The animal didn't look as though it had just come in off the range—it looked as though it had been hard ridden, which meant it had been shod before being brought here.

Pablo was saying, "I'll have your *caballo* ready in another few minutes, señor."

Jim Hatfield turned away. "I will be in town for the night," he said. "Is there a good hotel in town?"

"*Si, si*," the blacksmith sounded eager. He pointed with the tongs. "In the plaza. The Maison Blanco."

He stood in the open front door of his

shop, staring after the tall Ranger. His shoulder muscles quivered. After awhile when he went back inside. Little beads of sweat glistened on his dark, ugly face.

CHAPTER IV

Tarini

GONE seamy along with the rest of the town, the Maison Blanco was a three-story block of adobe. There were long cracks in the dirty yellow, peeling walls. Shallow iron balconies bellied precariously under shuttered windows. In the soft dusk, however, it retained an air of dissolute elegance, of a bygone splendor.

The lobby retained the seedy look, where worn carpeting led to the desk and across to stairs along the north wall. A sour-faced old Mexican in soiled shirt sleeves took the Ranger's money, watched him sign the register "Jim Smith" and handed him a key to Room 23.

The room was bigger than most of those the Lone Wolf encountered on out-of-the-way trails, but the walls had the same peeling whitewash and cockroaches halted to eye him with propritory suspicion. It was a low-ceilinged room, and close. He pushed the window outward and looked down into a small courtyard enclosed on right and left by low wings of the hotel and in the rear by a high adobe wall.

A breeze stirred against him, hot and alive with the smell of cooking, strong with garlic and chile. It was dark in the room, but in the western sky some light of the dying day was left. He listened to the sounds of the town, of women calling, of children crying. The ring of a hammer on iron . . . Pablo's?

It was the tag end of the day, and there was a letdown in the big Ranger. He traveled a lone trail whenever that could be arranged, because he wanted it that way, but sometimes, in lonely moments like this, he felt the pull of a woman's laughter, of a place called home.

He thumbed a match to flame; the lamp on the table flared brightly as he lighted the wick. He unbuckled his cartridge belts, tossed them on the bed, and dropped his hat over them. He was shucking his shirt when a shy-faced *muchacho* knocked and came into the room, bringing water for his empty earthenware pitcher.

The boy left and Hatfield walked to the wash basin over which a faded mirror threw back his reflection. His bared chest was broad and muscled, but he frowned at the dark, unshaven face which greeted him. The days on the trail had given him a gaunt, hard look.

He thought of May Thorpe then, and the stunned, unbelieving look in her eyes. The memory was a prod, lifting him out of his weariness. He thought bleakly, He's here, somewhere. He's run this far, and now he's holed up. I'll find him, Bob, if I have to root out every man in town.

He took his shaving tools from his bag and laid them on the table. His shoulder muscles bunched as he washed and then lathered. He was starting to shave when the door opened.

There had been no knock, nor had he heard anyone in the hallway. He caught the blur of movement in the hazy mirror and turned slowly, knowing it was too late if the intruder had come to kill.

The visiting man closed the door softly and leaned his back against it. He was on the edge of the lamp glow, but the short-muzzled small-caliber pistol in his hand needed no spotlight.

"Please finish shaving, señor," he said. He had a careless, confident voice. "I can wait."

Jim Hatfield studied the naked, muscled torso above the red sash; the golden earring winked in the light. He remembered Cibo Gallo's exasperated comment concerning this man, "He comes and goes."

Tarini!

Hatfield's tone was cold. "I've got sixty dollars in my pocket, kid. But I'll kick your teeth in if you try to get it!"

Tarini chuckled. "Bigger men than you have tried that, senor. But it is not your money I am after, nor was I after the

Señor Stevens' *pesos* when I lifted his purse."

HATFIELD frowned. "What in hell *are* you after?"

"At the moment, information." Tarini's white teeth gleamed in a quick smile.

The Ranger grunted. He turned back to the mirror and continued shaving. He could see Tarini in it; the young fellow was waiting patiently, the lazy smile on his lips.

An insolent cuss, the Lone Wolf thought, but he had a strong man's admiration for the strange Mexican. He finished shaving, taking his time deliberately. The man by the door showed no signs of nervousness.

Hatfield put aside his razor and turned to face him. "Who in hell are you, kid? What do you do besides get in trouble?"

Tarini lifted an indolent shoulder. "Me? I'm Tarini. Surely Cibo told you." He moved into the room now, a confident, cat-footed youngster with bronzed bared torso. He put his left foot on a chair by the bed and watched Hatfield, the pistol held easily in his hand.

"I come and go, señor. With the wind. I am Tarini."

"Sure," Hatfield nodded, unimpressed. "Some day you'll try lifting a purse from the wrong man and you'll get a bullet between your eyes."

"It is possible," the young Mexican admitted. "But not likely." His eyes were shiny black, and they laughed with high humor. There was a confidence about him that was akin to the unquestioned ability of a tiger stalking its prey.

His right hand flicked upward. The pistol described a short circle in the air and settled in his left hand. At the same time a knife appeared in his right, drawn from somewhere within his sash.

It was a smooth and eye-baffling display, and when he spoke his voice was softly mocking.

"I can put a bullet on *el señor cucharacho* who is at the moment showing interest in the edge of the mirror, or I could as easily sever his head with this knife."

Hatfield's smile was easy. "All right, Tarini. I believe you. What are you after?"

"The other half of a map. The treasure of Los Diablos." Tarini's voice was even.

Hatfield dropped the towel on the small table and let his hands hang by his sides. His gun-belts were on the bed. He measured the young Mexican with cold, questioning regard.

"What do you know about half a map?"

Tarini chuckled. "I was at the canyon above the Wall, señor, when Vittorio died—"

The Lone Wolf's hands fisted, his eyes held a narrowing anger. He had a remembered glimpse of a rifle barrel aimed at his head. He said, "You are handy with a rifle, too, Tarini," and his voice was dry and without humor and those who knew the Lone Wolf would have known he was at his most dangerous.

"I am handy with everything," Tarini admitted modestly. "Last night I would have killed you. It was not my idea to spare you, senor. But—" he grinned insolently—"*Dios* has ways not always known to man. Today, at *El Toro Rojo*, you did me a favor. Although I assure you, the Señor Stevens would not have lived to fire that pistol."

"You're a cocky son," the Ranger muttered.

"That I am," Tarini admitted. He slipped the knife back under his sash. "You are a friend of Cibo Gallo's, perhaps?"

"I am my own friend," the Lone Wolf growled. "I never met Gallo before today. It was because of you that I had the pleasure."

Tarini considered. "You may be speaking the truth. You would not have made an enemy of Stevens, if it weren't so. And you surely were no friend of Vittorio's." His eyes held a puzzled glint. "Why were you after Vittorio, señor?"

"I wanted a look at his right arm," the Ranger answered drily.

TARINI frowned. "You were not after the map?"

"I didn't even know he had a map," Jim

Hatfield said, "until I found it on him." He moved toward the bed where he had laid out a clean black shirt. Tarini watched him like a cat.

"I believe you, señor. But I am puzzled. My partner and I." He grinned. "We were waiting at the canyon, but not for Vittorio. It was Lazarro we expected. Then we saw Vittorio, with you behind him." He tilted the short muzzle upward as Hatfield bent over his shirt. "We were watching from the moment Vittorio fell. I saw you look at his arm. It meant nothing to me. But the map, señor—that was why we were waiting. And this is the information I've come for. The other half—where is it?"

Hatfield's grin was bleak. "You're Tarini," he said mockingly. "You find out."

The young fellow's eyes narrowed and now there was no laughter in them. His tone was soft.

"Do not underestimate me, señor. I intend to find out. Lazarro was supposed to meet us at the canyon last night. Instead it was Vittorio who showed up, with you in pursuit. Someone has the other half of that map which rightfully belongs to my companion. I intend to get it."

Hatfield had picked up his shirt, about three feet from the Mexican gypsy. "Hell!" he said in sudden exasperation. "If you really want it that bad, Tarini, it's in my bag."

As Tarini instinctively glanced at the warbag on the other side of the bed, Hatfield made his move. His shirt came down in a whistling cut for Tarini's gun hand, and he was up behind it, his shoulder lunging into the stocky figure.

The revolver barked its angry protest into the floor. The next moment the Lone Wolf was tangled with a wildcat. The young breed was slippery as an eel. He grunted once, under the impact of Hatfield's short, jolting blow to his midsection and twisted, jamming his shoulder into his antagonist's face. His gun hand came around for a slashing blow for Hatfield's head.

The Lone Wolf's fingers closed around his wrist. The gun went off again into the ceiling and bits of plaster drifted down over them. Hatfield's left hand dug into Tarini's stomach, bringing a sharp gasp to the young Spanish gypsy. Hatfield's left whipped up again, smearing Tarini's lips against his teeth.

Tarini sagged then. The Lone Wolf twisted the gun out of his hand, gripped him by both arms and flung him against the wall. Tarini bounced off and flopped down by the window.

Jim Hatfield stood at the foot of the bed, his chest heaving slightly, his muscles cording across his shoulders.

"You're pretty good, kid," he muttered. "But not quite good enough. Next time—"

He whirled as a hand fumbled at the door. A man's voice cursed in Mexican. The door swung open and the desk clerk took a step inside. He came up on his toes as he saw Jim Hatfield and the gun in his hand. His mouth dropped open.

"Just a little target practice," Hatfield said coldly. He put a hand on the man's shirt front and pushed him back into the hall. "I'll pay for any damages in the morning."

He closed the door and was turning back when he heard the soft, quick scuffing of a body. Tarini was sliding across the window sill. Hatfield's gun hand made its swift levelling motion, then he held it. He ran to the window, looked down.

It was a good fifteen-foot drop into the courtyard, but Tarini had landed like a cat. He now was a shadow moving across the courtyard. Hatfield held his fire. He saw Tarini go over the seven-foot far wall with the easy grace of a cougar, and shook his head in grudging admiration.

"Thought I had him out for awhile," he muttered. "The kid must have an iron jaw."

HE PULLED back from the window, slid the small pistol into his pocket, and slipped his shirt over his head. The heavy Peacemakers felt good at his hips when he buckled them in place.

He had not finished with Tarini, the first definite lead he had encountered here.

But he had added to the puzzle.

Obviously Tarini had not known that Vittorio had had a companion in El Paso. From what he had said, he and his partner had not expected Vittorio at all.

Lazarro, that companion, probably was the unidentified Mexican who had been killed with Izzie in the El Paso pawn shop. That didn't however, explain who Lazzaro was and what connection he had with this strange young Mexican.

But it did affirm the big Ranger's conviction that the killer with the tattoo on his arm had come from Copperhead Valley—from this seedy town of Agua Dolce.

He had that much to go on now.

When Hatfield went downstairs to eat, he saw that not many of the tables in the dining room were occupied, and that all of the diners were minding their own business. The citizens of Agua Dolce had long ago learned to put on blinders to all but their immediate interests.

Hatfield ate without hurry. The thick black coffee at the end of the meal gave him a lift. He settled back to roll a smoke.

A lanky man in range clothes, and wearing a gun thonged down on his hip paused in the archway, glanced around the room, thumbed his hat up off his forehead, and decided he wasn't hungry. He turned back to the lobby.

Hatfield's attention slid from him to Pablo, and interest stirred. The gnome-like blacksmith had been too anxious to get him away from the roan stud. Why should someone from the Spada hacienda have been so anxious to have the roan reshod? Why at Pablo's? Even run-down as it was, surely the hacienda would have a blacksmith shop?

Suddenly Jim Hatfield wanted a look at that roan's old shoes. He had a grim hunch that they would tally with the tracks he had followed out of El Paso, the prints made by the horse ridden by the killer who had slashed Bob Thorpe!

Leaving the hotel he didn't notice the lanky figure in the lobby who left the hotel on his heels, pausing in the dark doorway only long enough to ascertain the direction Hatfield was taking.

CHAPTER V

Trouble is a Habit

HANGING from the rafters of the sloping ceiling of the blacksmith shop a lantern shed its feeble glow over the forge and junk harness. Behind the shop was an adobe hut, doll-sized, a bulking shadow in the night. It was quarters enough for Pablo, who was not married; his needs were meager.

Hatfield paused beside the rain barrel at the south end of the sloping roof. The ridge bulked behind the shop, blotting out the stars. A gibbous moon stained the sky to the west.

Goldy whinnied recognition from beyond the lantern's dim glare. The Ranger saw the big stallion's dark bulk move by the side wall, tug at his tether.

But the roan stud was gone!

He had come back too late! Regret made its momentary run through him. He let his glance take in the seemingly deserted street, held it a moment on Cibo Gallo's office where light spilled through barred windows. Then he stepped under the lantern and made his way around the forge that was still throwing heat from banked coals.

Pablo was not in the shop, but since he had left the hotel he might be in the hut. And Jim Hatfield had an idea that Pablo could tell him a lot about that roan and who had ridden him into Agua Dolce this afternoon.

The shadows were thick behind the forge and he didn't see the body that lay there. His toe caught against the huddled figure and he tripped, fell forward.

The shot that came then made its abrupt roar in the night, as if triggered from inside that body. The bullet scraped skin from the top of the big Ranger's shoulder, shearing through the shirt close to the base of his neck.

He fell across Pablo's body, his outflung hands knocking over the grindstone just

beyond. The heavy wheel made its clatter in the shop's quiet, overriding the flat explosion. He lay still, a Colt snugged in his hand.

He was away from the edge of the lanternlight here, partially protected by the forge, and the ambusher had a grim choice to make.

Waiting, he heard the soft crunch of boots on the road, heading for the shop, there, then turned and legged it for the other side of the road.

Hatfield's snapshot made him stumble, but he lurched erect and made the protection of an alley. He didn't stop.

Goldy stamped uneasily as acrid smoke filled the shed. His whicker was questioning. Quiet settled over the street except that somewhere in the night, a door slammed. But no one was curious enough

A TALL TEXAS TALE

CURSE OR CURE

A LADY bought a parrot from a Texas cowboy, only to learn that it cursed every time it said anything. She put up with it as long as she could, but finally one day lost her patience.

"If I ever hear you swear again," she declared, "I'll wring your scrawny neck."

A few minutes later, she remarked rather casually that it was a fine day. Whereupon the parrot echoed, "It's a hell of a fine day."

The lady immediately grabbed the parrot by the neck and spun him around and around until he was almost dead.

"Now, then," she said, "It's a fine day, isn't it?"

"Fine day?" sputtered the parrot. "Where the hell were you when the cyclone struck?"

—E. J. Ritter, Jr.

and he tensed. Out in the street a hoarse voice sounded a flat warning.

"Ruch! He might be tricky—"

The Lone Wolf came to his feet, whirling to face the sound. A tall figure pulled up by the rain barrel less than fifteen feet away. The lantern light flickered its glare over Stevens' face.

There was that moment of stark surprise in the rancher's eyes, then his Colt jerked and made its red flare at his waist, and the Ranger's bullet smashed into him.

Behind Stevens, the lanky man Jim had seen in the hotel dining room doorway, slewed to a sudden stop. He fired once into the shed, at the dimly seen shadow to investigate the racketing shots which had disturbed Agua Dolce.

Hatfield reached up for the lantern. He brought it down beside the blacksmith's body and his jaw tightened grimly at what he saw. Pablo lay face-down, his heavily muscled back glistening with blood from the knife buried between his shoulders. The knife was enough to kill him, but the man who had used it had added the senseless cruelty of hammering Pablo's head into a pulp with the smith's own hammer!

The same sadistic touch which had characterized Bob Thorpe's killing! It brought cold fire to Jim Hatfield's green eyes.

He set the lantern down beside Pablo's

body and stepped into the shadows as a lumbering figure loomed up in the street.

CIBO GALLO lumbered on to a stop beside Stevens' sprawled body. He had the big Dragoon in his hand. His glance probed into the shadows of the shop and he made a motion to bring the muzzle up.

Hatfield's flat voice stopped him. "Don't go jumping to conclusions, Cibo!"

The paunchy officer was a thick figure in the moonlight. His braided coat was unbuttoned, revealing a hairy paunch and chest. He dropped his gaze to Stevens and there was an edge of surprise in his tone, a grudging wonder:

"You seem to have a habit, señor, of making trouble."

"No!" Jim Hatfield snapped, and corrected. "Only taking care of it when it comes looking for me."

"I've seen the inside of your office," the Lone Wolf forestalled him. "We've had our little talk. I'm a peaceful man until I'm pushed. Even a stranger, Cibo, has a right to defend himself in Agua Dolce."

"Perhaps." Cibo's tone was baffled. He was stymied and he knew it. He shifted his narrowing glance from the gun in the Ranger's hand to the body in the lantern light. "You seem to have been quite busy defending yourself, Señor—"

Hatfield made a short, beckoning motion with his Colt. "Come in and take a good look, Cibo."

The big man hesitated. His step was slow and deliberate as he moved under the sloping roof. He stopped beside Pablo's body, glancing only briefly at the huddled figure.

"I returned for my cayuse," Jim Hatfield said coldly. "I found Pablo as you see him. I had time but for a quick look, then Stevens took a shot at me. His lips tightened at the scowl on Cibo's broad face.

"Why?" Gallo asked heavily. "Why did you come to Agua Dolce?"

"I'm looking for a man, Cibo. A man with a tattoo on his right arm."

There was nothing to see in Gallo's mustached face; his eyes were heavy-lidded. "There are several men in Agua Dolce with a tattoo on an arm," he said drily. "I, too, have one." He thrust his Dragoon in his waistband and tugged up his right sleeve. "See?"

He stepped closer to the light and Hatfield saw that his thick hairy forearm was decorated with the buxum figure of a naked woman. She seemed to writhe obscenely as he flexed his fingers.

"I can make her dance for you," Cibo suggested sneeringly.

"You can do better than that!" Hatfield snapped. "You can roll up Stevens' sleeve for me!"

The big man snorted. He walked to the figure crumpled by the rain barrel, crouched down and worked the dead man's shirt sleve up from his right forearm.

Stevens, the Ranger could see, did not go in for tattoos.

"You are satisfied, no?" Gallo asked mildly.

Hatfield shrugged.

"That hombre—the one you seek—you are sure he is here in Agua Dolce?"

"He's here!" Jim Hatfield said grimly.

Gallo sighed. "I shall resign my job," he said heavily. "I am but poorly paid, and my heart is not in this kind of work. I am blamed for everything."

The Lone Wolf's bleak voice held little sympathy. "Like the man you killed this afternoon, Cibo?"

Gallo's eyes held a passing flicker. He made a gesture of resigned vexation. "If there is rustling, I am blamed for not stopping it. The Spadas blame me for their troubles."

"I shall not add to them," Hatfield broke in curtly. He moved to Pablo's side and picked up the lantern. Gallo watched curiously as the big man walked to the big golden stallion. He saw the visitor bend down to examine Goldy's hind foot.

PABLO, it seemed, had finished with the sorrel before he was killed.

"You will do me one favor, Cibo," the Ranger said pleasantly. "You will saddle

my horse for me."

The big man hesitated. His smile made its crooked run across his thick lips. "You do not trust me."

"I do not want to have to kill you!" the Lone Wolf answered bluntly.

He waited while Gallo threw blanket and saddle over Goldy's back. The sorrel turned to eye Cibo with an unfriendly stare. Gallo did a good job; he tightened the cinches and stepped back, turning to look questioningly at the tall man in the shadows.

"You are now satisfied?"

"Not quite." The Ranger's voice was flat. "You will drop that cannon you pack by the rain barrel as you leave. You will walk back to your office and you will not stop until you get there!"

"You are a very suspicious hombre," Gallo hissed angrily. But he did as requested.

He was a thick, diminishing shadow when Hatfield quickly untied the sorrel, and led him outside. Holstering his Peacemaker, he stepped up into saddle and whirled the eager stallion away.

The drum of Goldy's hooves stopped Gallo. He turned to watch Hatfield fade into the night; there was a brooding patience in him as he stood there, a few feet from the office.

The voice from the shadows along the wall made its bitter observation. "I told you he was a dangerous man, Cibo. It was a mistake to send Stevens after him."

Cibo made no comment. He sucked his thick lips in over his teeth, a habit of his when he was thinking. "There have been other mistakes," he said finally. His voice had an impatient edge now. "Perhaps it was a mistake to separate from Vittorio. It was a bigger mistake to divide the map."

"It seemed a good idea at the time," the voice interrupted. It had a sullen note. "You have seen him, Cibo. He is not a man easily shaken."

"Nor a fool!" Cibo's voice was sharp. "Who is he?"

"I don't know. He appeared on our trail a half-day out of El Paso. Twice we thought we had lost him."

"Vittorio would have been here, had he shaken him," Cibo said. He was thinking out loud. "Since he has not appeared, it must be that this hombre caught up with him. It must be true, also, that he has the other half of th map—and that it is the treasure of Los Diablos he, too, is after. And yet—" Cibo frowned. "He seems more interested in finding a man with a tattoo on his arm."

"A tattoo?" The voice in the shadows held a thin intensity. "What kind of tattoo, Cibo?"

"He did not say." Cibo's voice held a thin mockery. "But he was not interested in mine."

There was silence in the shadows. Then the man there chuckled. The sound sent a shiver down Gallo's spine.

"Perhaps he will find that man with the tattoo, eh, Cibo? When he is dead—with my knife in his throat!"

CHAPTER VI

Girl at the Piano

WHEN the solid gates of the Spada hacienda loomed up before the Lone Wolf, they were closed and barred and seemingly unbreachable. A narrow iron gate was set in the wall to the left of the big doors and a cord dangled from a small iron bell above this.

Jim Hatfield dismounted and walked to the gate. He pulled on the cord and the bell made its jangle in the stillness, quieting the insect hum along the base of the wall.

He waited in the moonlight, a tall and silent man—a cottony puff of cloud passed across the moon's distorted face and brushed its shadow over him. In the quiet he heard the faint run of melody on a piano.

The face on the other side of the grillwork was dark and suspicious; it seemed to materialize there as he waited. The

voice was as suspicious as the face.

"Qui esta?"

"I wish to see Don Furillo," Jim said.

The man's eyes glittered strangely; he scowled. "Don Furillo is dead."

Hatfield stiffened. Cibo Gallo had mentioned a Don Furillo in his previous rambling conversation. Had there been a reason behind his garrulousness?

"The Señor Spada, whoever he is," the Ranger said sharply.

"Don Clemente?" The man's tone had a sullen hostility. "He wishes to see no one."

"Don Clemente, then," Hatfield growled. "I have business with him."

The man shook his head. "No one," he repeated harshly.

Hatfield took a step toward the door. The muzzle of a carbine poked at him from behind the grillwork. The sentry's voice was unyielding.

"Vamos!"

Hatfield shrugged. There was no arguing with the man; obviously he had his orders. Remembering what he had heard of the Spadas, it was understandable that Don Clemente would be in poor mood for strangers. Yet there was a matter of a rangy roan stallion with a blaze face—it was a Spada animal, unless Pablo had lied.

He had a moment's impulse to try to force those doors, then the sound of the piano gave him pause. He grinned coldly at the suspicious sentry, waved briefly, and mounted.

He took the trail away from town, leading down the valley—the trail which parralleled the hacienda's high adobe wall for almost a quarter of a mile. The piano increased in volume as he rode; whoever was playing it was of quicksilver mood. It was gay and it was sad, there was triumph and defeat in the run of the keys. It brought a feeling of loneliness in the player, and of frustration being expended in music.

The Lone Wolf finally reined Goldy in under the dappled shadow of an overhanging tree growing inside the high wall. The music died away and the silence seemed empty without it. Goldy shook his head, his bit irons jingling.

"Want to hear more, eh?" the Ranger whispered and, as if in anticipation, the strains of a Spanish melody, sad and yearning, filled the night again.

Jim Hatfield coiled his reins and hung them from his saddle-horn, giving Goldy freedom of movement should the stallion have need of it. Drawing his feet up under him, the Lone Wolf straightened, balanced in saddle. His hands closed over a jutting limb; he swung himself lithely to the top of the high wall.

Goldy edged in close to the wall's deep shadow at his rider's whispered command. He would remain there until the Lone Wolf returned.

FROM the wall, under the shadowing tree, the dismounted rider looked down into a small private garden serving a wing of the big hacienda. In the middle of the garden a kneeling plaster angel cupped her hands to water falling from a carefully contrived jumble of rocks—the water welled up from the top of this rock pile and fell in a series of small, tinkling falls past the angel's hands into a small pool.

The Ranger's eyes moved past the pool to the wing of the hacienda. Heavy beams jutted over a narrow flagstone patio onto which casement doors opened, the light behind them throwing their pattern across the stones.

The profile of the girl framed in the open door was highlighted by the lamp on the table in front of her.

The stone angel in the garden had a classic cold beauty; this girl, wearing a vivid red, off-the-shoulder velvet dress possessed the same sort of aloof, remote chiseling of features, dusky gold, young, with a touch of sadness. She seemed drawn within herself, playing to some unseen audience—and Hatfield hesitated, knowing he was an intruder and feeling like one. And caught, too, by some quality in this scene he was hauntingly aware of having missed.

She was seated on a mahogany bench

before a small piano. It was a delicately carved instrument which she worked with her right foot on a small bellows. Her fingers seemed to run dreamily over the keys.

Scattered puffs of cloud made their run across the moon's face, changing the garden from light to dark; it was as though it and the girl framed by the open casement door was a stage and someone in the wings was changing the lights.

Hatfield took a deep breath. The music still troubled him with its haunting memories, but he had broken the spell. He grinned a little wryly as he dropped down into the garden.

When Ava Spada sat at the piano and played music taught her by her mother, she seemed to feel the empty hacienda come to life again, echo with warm laughter of friends, quicken with happy anticipation of fiesta. She seemed to see her father, Don Furillo, step through the vaulting archway of the living room, a tall, angular-faced man whose sternness of features broke easily into smiles.

At the piano, in the room that had been that of her parents, she seemed to feel her mother's presence again, as if her mother were standing by her side, smiling approval. Yet it was all of six years since Dona Isabella had died. And with her passing the gentleness and the gaiety had vanished from the big house and anger and despair had taken its place.

Ava's father had aged quickly after her mother's death. He smiled less often. Her uncle Clemente and he had bitter quarrels over money, over methods of dealing with the raiders of Spada stock. There was less money for fiestas, servants were dismissed. But until her father's death, under the knife of some unknown assassin under the very gates of the hacienda, there had always been hope that things would change.

The week before he died Don Furillo had sat with her in the living room, a tired, bitter man.

"There is not much left of the Spada wealth," he had told her. "This house, a few leagues of land, and those pictures of our ancestors." He had lifted a hand to the framed paintings on the walls. A ghost of a smile had touched his lips then as his gaze had lingered on the portrait of a huge man in armor. "And the treasure of Captain Ramon, hidden somewhere in these hills."

He had never really believed in that treasure, she knew, but it was woven into the story of the Spadas and could not be dismissed without marring the whole.

"What there is left is yours, Daughter," he had said. "Remember that."

SHE saw her father's bowed head now in the mirror of her mind, and then a shadow seemed to fall across him and she became aware of someone at the patio door.

The awareness came slowly, and with it a sense of relief, a quickening pulse of gladness. She turned, her lips parting in greeting that did not emerge. She shrank back, her fingers jarring across the keys.

"*You!*" Fear and surprise blended in her gasp, and it puzzled Hatfield.

"Were you expecting me?" He frowned.

The girl remained rigid on the bench, the surprise fading from her face. A questioning intentness darkened the liquid black of her eyes. Her bosom heaved against the binding velvet and the gold locket lying in the hollow of her breasts caught the light and burned in brief yellow flare.

"Who are you? What do you want?" She was breathing easier now, and anger raised the pitch of her voice. "I have but to scream."

"I like your playing better," Hatfield said, and smiled. He was a big figure in that room and the physical impact of his presence crowded her. They were all tall men, these Texans, she thought.

"I'm looking for Don Furillo," Hatfield said.

Her eyes widened. She stood up, facing him, feeling less small, less helpless.

"My father is dead," she said. "For almost a year."

The Ranger frowned. "I didn't know. Perhaps, then, it is Don Clemente I

come to see."

Fear reappeared briefly in the girl's face. "Men who come to call on my uncle come through the main gate."

"I tried that," Hatfield interrupted. "It was closed, and I wasn't welcomed." He regarded her with close attention, stirred by some vague sense of familiarity, by some almost-grasped remembrance of her voice.

"Have we met before?" he asked.

She stiffened. "I hardly think so. Why do you ask?"

"You seem to remind me of someone." He shrugged. "I must be mistaken. And I'm sorry I intruded in this way. But I must see your uncle, and as I couldn't get through the gate—"

"You came over the wall, like a thief!" she flared. "What do you want here? Do you not know my uncle will have you horsewhipped if—"

There was no sound to reach the Ranger's ear, but he saw her eyes widen and focus behind him and he was alive now because of reflexes, trained by dangerous years to instantaneous action. He crouched and whirled in a fluid blur of movement and the big Peacemaker seemed to materialize in his right hand.

The knife that made its baffled snicker over him caromed off the base of the lamp and rang flatly against the oak panels beyond, dropping to the floor at the girl's feet. The lamp teetered a little, setting the shadows to dancing.

The Lone Wolf straightened, cocking the hammer under his thumb.

"Cibo was right about you," he said softly. "You come and you go like a will-o'-the-wisp. But this time, Tarini, you stay!"

The gypsy stood framed in the light spilling across the flagstones, his bared chest gleamnig. He was tilted forward on his toes and his muscles were gathered to jump. He looked into the black muzzle of the Ranger's Colt and a grin drew his swollen lips apart.

"You must have the devil behind you, señor," he muttered. "I have never encountered a more capable hombre."

"Nor I a more persistent one," Hatfield growled. He made a motion with the Colt. "You followed me here?"

Tarini shrugged. "I did not follow. But I knew you were here when I saw your horse on the other side of the wall."

JIM HATFIELD glanced at the girl out of the corner of his eye. "So Tarini, too, knows his way over the garden wall?" The sense of familiarity was stronger now; it lay just beyond the reach of his crowding thoughts.

"Yes!" The girl's voice was bitter. She had backed away from the knife on the floor, stopping when her hips pressed against an ornate dresser. "But you knew that before you came, didn't you? It was not my father, or my uncle, you came to see."

"I hate to disappoint you, beautiful as you are," the Ranger cut in flatly. "But I came on business, not pleasure." He saw Tarini move and he laid his glance hard on the young fellow. "You don't have a chance," he said coldly. "Don't try it."

Tarini came down off his toes. He licked his lips. "I am not a fool," he muttered grudgingly. "But if you would look behind you."

Hatfield heard the soft rustle of velvet as the girl moved. He took a step backward and glanced toward her.

She was against the wall, beside the open dresser drawer, and a small caliber gun, similar to that which Hatfield had taken from Tarini, was in her small fist. Her voice came crisp across the room:

"Drop that gun, señor!"

And now the voice and the figure came together. A soft chuckle sounded in Jim Hatfield's throat. "This time it is your choice to make, Miss Spada. Pull that trigger and I assure you Tarini will be dead before you have a second try!"

The silence crowded into the room, weighted with a growing frustration. Tarini broke it with a sigh.

"It is as he says, Ava." His voice held a thread of regret. "I should have killed him then."

"At the canyon above the Wall," Hat-

field injected grimly. His eyes were on the girl with cool regard. "It was you with the rifle, wasn't it?"

Slowly her shoulders slumped; her gun hand dropped by her side. "We were waiting for Lazarro," she said. "We were waiting for the map he was to bring back from El Paso."

"You have it now," Hatfield said coldly.

"Only half of it," the girl replied. Defiance brought a touch of color to her face. "The map is mine. Whatever treasure lies buried in the Diablos belongs to me. Tarina was only helping me obtain what is rightfully mine!"

It fitted. It explained Tarini's persistence in seeking him out. But it brought them no closer to the man he wanted. He had come to Agua Dolce on the trail of a killer, but the trail he was following seemed to have become entangled with a map of some ancient treasure. There were too many people after it, and one of them was the killer he wanted.

Tarini came into the room, stepping slowly across the threshold.

"I was with Pedro, the undertaker, when they brought the bodies in, Señor Smith." He used the name deliberately, questioningly, and the Ranger knew he must have seen the hotel register. "There has been much blood across the face of the moon tonight," he muttered. "First Guy Cabot—"

Hatfield saw the girl start at the name, and wondered.

"Then Pablo—and Stevens." Tarini licked his lips again. "I was in the back room, having wine, but I heard the talk. The big *estranjero* with the golden horse, he is responsible. I listened and tried to make sense of what I heard. Stevens I could understand. But Guy Cabot—I did not even know he was in town. And Pablo." He shook his head. "What are you after, señor?"

"You have long ears, Tarini," Hatfield

"Wow! Some rain dance!"

answered coldly. "But it is a mistake to put too much trust in them. I did not kill Guy Cabot—nor Pablo. Only Stevens."

"It is what Cibo Gallo says," Tarini muttered. "And Gallo is the law in Agua Dolce."

The girl moved away from the wall, her shadow sliding gracefully behind her. "If it is not the map I took from you, then what is it you want here? What brings you to Agua Dolce?"

In the moment before Jim Hatfield's answer, someone rapped hard on the heavy door.

An imperious voice demanded: "Ava! Maria tells me there is someone with you! If it's that gypsy—"

Jim Hatfield was moving toward the door. He opened it in one swift movement and stepped back, smiling bleakly, the gun in his hand backing his gentle invitation:

"Please come in, Don Clemente!"

CHAPTER VIII

"Half a Map, Señor?"

DON CLEMENTE was a little, wiry, graying man, elegantly attired in the manner of a Spanish grandee. There was a peculiar ugliness about his narrow face. It had the pinched, shrewd cunning of a monkey, and like a monkey he stared at Jim Hatfield.

A petulant anger flushed his dark face; it had been there when the Ranger had opened the door. Now shock made its quick run through him, holding him with heavy knobbed walking stick upraised.

He found his voice, a dry, hacking whisper. "If you've come as a thief, you'll find little to steal here."

Jim shook his head. "I came to see you, señor—on business. Your sentry would not let me through the gate."

"On business?" Don Clemente's arm sagged; he leaned his weight on his stick. "Who are you?"

"Jim Hatfield is the name," the Ranger told him. He slid his Colt into holster and reached inside his boot for his badge. In the flaring lamplight it glittered in the palm of his hand, a lone star set in a circle of silver—the authority of the Texas Rangers.

Don Clemente blinked. He said slowly, "You are the Ranger who is known as the Lone Wolf?"

Hatfield nodded. Behind him he heard Tarini's low whistle. Ava Spada sighed.

Slowly Don Clemente hobbled to a chair. He sank down into it, his hands clasped about the stick in front of him. "I am honored," he said, but his voice held a thin uneasiness.

"I sent for no help from your organization, although it would have been better had I done so, instead of depending so much on that fool, Cibo Gallo." His voice had a bitter ring. "Why are you here, Señor Hatfield?"

"I'm looking for a man with a tattoo on his arm," Hatfield said quietly.

"A tattoo? What kind of a tattoo?" The little Spaniard's voice sounded bewildered.

"I know only that the man I want has a coiled snake tattooed on his right forearm," the Ranger answered grimly. "I followed him from El Paso."

Don Clemente's unwinking black eyes studied him. "There are many men with tattooes," he said wearily. "Are you sure this man came to Agua Dolce?"

"I am sure," Jim Hatfield said.

"You were on the trail of Vittorio Mareno when we saw you," Tarini said. He had moved into the room; he was frowning. "We saw you look at Vittorio's arm. Now you say there was another man?"

The Ranger nodded. "I might as well tell you my part of the story," he said bluntly. "It'll explain why I am here."

They listened as the Lone Wolf spoke. The water falling eternally past the angel's cupped hands made a murmuring undertone to his voice.

"I came to Agua Dolce only to find this man," he finished. "And I have only Bob Thorpe's dying words to identify him. But

I'll find him. If I have to lay bare every right arm in Agua Dolce, I'll find that man!"

There was a silence after he had finished. Out in the hall a servant appeared and stood there nervously waiting until Don Clemente, rousing, waved him away.

"Your dying friend may have been mistaken," the *haciendado* said slowly.

"It is possible," Hatfield admitted. "But I'm still looking for a man with that tattooed snake on his right arm."

"And you came here? To see me?" Don Clemente's voice was puzzled; it held an uneasy fear. "You think I—"

"I came to ask you about a roan stallion," the Ranger said. He described the animal he had seen at the blacksmith shop. "I have reason to believe the man I'm after rode that horse. He came into Agua Dolce behind me; perhaps he did not know I was already in town. He may have thought Vittorio had delayed me. But he rode that horse into Pablo's shop and gave orders for every shoe to be changed."

DON CLEMENTE rose. His face flushed. "And you think that horse belonged here, Señor Hatfield? You are right. Until a fortnight ago that roan was in my stable—the fastest animal left to us."

"He disappeared shortly after my uncle dismissed Vittorio from our employ," Ava said. She was standing beside Tarini now—they were of a height.

Don Clemente seemed to notice them for the first time. He turned to the girl, a sudden rage shaking him.

"So you disobeyed my orders? You and this—this gypsy—" He raised his stick, his face mottling. He seemed to have forgotten that Jim Hatfield was in the room. "I have warned you before!" he snarled to Tarini. "I told you I would have you horsewhipped if you ever climbed that wall again—"

"I invited him, Uncle Clemente!" Ava's voice was rebellious. "I have a right to see whom I please here. This house belongs to me. I have come of age."

"To have a lover come over the wall? That is your right?" A sneer distorted Don Clemente's simian features. He shook his cane at the silent young Spanish gypsy. "A nobody. A thief and a trouble-maker—that is who you wish to see?"

"Yes!" There was defiance in the girl's reply. "Since my father died you have barred the gate to nearly everyone. I am almost a prisoner in my own house. Perhaps you thought you could shut out our troubles by doing this, but—"

Jim Hatfield stepped into the family quarrel. "I came here to find Bob's killer, Don Clemente. Now it seems I have also become involved in your troubles. Perhaps I can be of help to you."

The *haciendado* bit his lip. "I have let my anger carry me away," he admitted. "Come! My niece's bedroom is hardly the proper place for such talk. In the living room we can be more comfortable. I will have Tomas bring us brandy."

He turned to the door. Ava's voice stopped him. "And Tarini? He comes, too?"

Don Clemente looked back at her. He nodded bitterly. "He too."

In the quiet of the big Spada living room furnished with the glory of past generations, somber now in its gloomy future, Don Clemente recounted a story of raids which had reduced the hacienda to the verge of ruin, all but wiped out its stock, killed his loyal vaqueros, frightened his servants.

The trouble had begun even before Ava's father, his brother, had been killed. They had quarreled over it, Don Clemente admitted.

"I saw what would happen if the raids continued," he explained. "I demanded my share of the estate." He brooded over his brandy glass. "We quarreled and my brother paid me what I demanded. In return I signed away my right to what was left of the Spada fortunes." His laughter had a bitter edge. "I went away. To the south—into Mexico. In Mexico there was wine, women—" He sipped his drink. "While I had money the women

did not mind my looks, or that I walked not like other men. But I was a fool. I soon ran through the money my brother had given me. I was in a brothel, penniless, when I received word my brother had died."

"A knife in his back," Ava Spada said. She was sitting in a chair facing the Ranger. Her eyes had a dark, indrawn look. "And stranger still, the knife slashes across his face. As you say your friend was mutilated, Ranger. That was how I found my father."

The Lone Wolf frowned. "When?"

"It is not yet a year since he was killed," she said.

"I arrived a few days later," Don Clemente said. His voice held a faint apology. "I arrived in time for the funeral." He glanced at the visitor, his wizened features crinkling. "It seems we have this in common, Ranger. It may be that the man who killed my brother is the same man who killed your friend."

HATFIELD agreed. He leaned forward. "It could be. Raids such as you mentioned mean an organized gang. You have no knowledge who these men are?"

Don Clemente shrugged. "They ride at night—and they leave no witnesses. At least none who dare talk." His eyes narrowed in thought. "But there are stories that have reached me, through my servants—stories of a man who calls himself *El Cascabel*, the snake. It is said he is the leader of these men."

Tarini nodded. "I, too, have heard the name mentioned. Possibly he is the man you seek, Señor Hatfield."

A name, the Ranger was thinking, that could be applied to anyone.

"What about Ruch Stevens?" he asked.

"Stevens has a small *rancho* in the valley—in the poor country by the Arroyo Seco." Clemente's eyes glittered. "I have long suspected he and his men were behind the raids on our cattle. Even my good friends, the Cabots, suspected this. But there was never any proof, and Cibo—" He made a gesture with his hands.

"Guy Cabot is dead," Jim Hatfield said, remembering the blond boy who had come riding down the ridge trail to the law office. "I did not know, then, that he was your friend."

"Dead?" Don Clemente came forward in his chair, his right hand tightening on his stick. "It cannot be! He and his father are not in the valley. They are a hundred miles from here, driving cattle to—"

"He is dead," Hatfield repeated. "I saw him die."

"It is true," Tarini added. "I saw his body, in Pedro's."

The don sagged back in his chair. "How was he killed?"

Hatfield told him. "I don't know what Cibo said to him to make him draw, but Gallo shot him. I heard but little of what he said, but I think you'll find Raoul Cabot is dead also."

Don Clemente put his head between his hands. He remained like that for several moments. Tarini shifted slightly. He stood behind Ava's chair, and the Ranger saw little sympathy for her uncle in the girl's eyes, and only a remote interest in Tarini's regard.

There was little liking between this girl and her uncle, he reflected—and there was something in Tarini's face that puzzled him.

"I have just returned from a trip to the county seat," Don Clemente said, raising his head. "I went to see about the taxes. I thought I had found a way to outsmart the raiders. I made a deal with the Cabots to take the last of our cattle in with their trail herd. Raoul Cabot was to bring us the money when he returned—more than enough to pay the back taxes. Now there is nothing left."

"There is still the treasure in the Diablos," Jim Hatfield said.

"Yes, I had forgotten." Don Clemente's lips twitched. "If there ever was such a treasure." He looked at Ava, nodded. "I must tell you, Ranger, I have not believed in it. Nor did my brother. Even when the letter came from that man, Izzie, in El Paso, saying he had come into possession of a map which he thought rightfully be-

longed to me—" he amended, "to my niece, I did not believe it. This man was willing to relinquish it—for a price."

He laughed harshly. "The Spada treasure has been sought for generations, Señor Hatfield. A dozen maps have been found, all of them purporting to be the one left by Captain Ramon Spada."

"Then you did not go to El Paso?" the Ranger asked.

"No," the *haciendado* said. "I went to the county seat to see the sheriff." He pursed his lips. "But my niece insisted. She wanted to go herself, but I forbade it. A girl, on such a journey! A fool's errand."

"Someone else believed in that map," Ava reminded stiffly. "Enough to kill Lazarro for it."

"That appears to be so." Don Clemente nodded. "But I thought at the time it was just another trick of some shyster to get money. However, at my niece's insistence, I sent Lazarro, a trusted servant, to El Paso with the letter. And one hundred dollars in gold—all we could spare."

IT FILLED in the picture for Jim Hatfield, explained the dead Mexican found beside Izzie.

Don Clemente was regarding Ava with a thin scowl. "I did not know, until now, that you had disobeyed my orders to remain here while I was gone. You say you went to meet Lazarro, beyond the Wall."

"Yes." Ava's voice was definant. "Tarin was with me. I had a feeling something would happen to Lazarro."

"Then you have the map? The half which Señor Hatfield says he found on Vittorio?"

She nodded reluctantly. "It is of little help, without the other half," she said.

The Ranger rose. "Will you get it for me, Ava? I have an idea I can help."

Don Clemente frowned. "Half a map, Señor Hatfield?"

The Lone Wolf nodded. "I've been through the Diablos before. I may recognize some of the landmarks. I seem to remember one in particular, before I was—relieved of it." He smiled at the girl.

Ava came to her feet, excitement darkening her eyes. "It is our last hope," she said quickly. "I *know* the treasure is there! When I was a little girl I used to hear stories of Captain Ramon. I've always believed. But there was never before a great need to find the treasure he buried somewhere in the Diablos."

She hurried from the room.

Tarini eyed Hatfield with cool respect. "I have a confession to make," he said calmly. "No man ever succeeded in humbling me, as you have. I was deeply puzzled. Now, I am relieved." He brushed the back of his hand across his swollen lips, his eyes smiling with their old insolence. "I bow only to the prowess of the Lone Wolf—"

Don Clemente snorted.

Ava Spada returned in a few moments. She placed the ancient piece of hide on the table and they clustered around her. The Ranger's finger traced the path of Captain Ramon's flight—which ended at the peak of the Mounted General.

"I've seen that mountain," he remarked. "I think I can find it again."

"But without the other half," Don Clemente protested, "what will it get you?"

"The man I'm after!" Jim Hatfield said grimly.

Don Clemente straightened. His face was screwed up in a puzzled mask. "How?"

"The killer I followed from El Paso is in Agua Dolce," the Lone Wolf replied. "He must think I have this half of the map. Without it, he, too, is unable to find Captain Ramon's treasure."

Don Clemente nodded slowly.

"I shall make it known I am going into the Diablos," Hatfield continued. "I think that man will come after me."

"Not alone," Tarini broke in. "He will not be alone."

Jim Hatfield shrugged.

"Then, I, too, will come!" Ava said impulsively. She looked at the Ranger, her mouth setting with stubborn pride. "I alone here believed in that treasure. Without it I will lose everything." She flushed

Hatfield smiled. "We shall see." He mounted Goldy, looked down at the bare-chested figure in the dappled shadows. "Want a lift?"

Tarini shook his head. "The night is my friend, and I have some thinking to do. I shall see you again tomorrow night—at the shack."

Jim Hatfield edged Goldy toward the trail. Tarini's voice followed him.

"I have been in Agua Dolce long enough to learn a few things, Lone Wolf. Some I must keep to myself, until I am sure. But consider this. Ruch Stevens was stained coat, without which he never left the office, lay across a chair.

He scratched his hairy chest, his face lifting with bland regard to the big Ranger. He showed no surprise at the visit.

Behind the Lone Wolf, through the open door, he could see Goldy and a smaller, spotted mare loaded as for a journey. He waved carelessly.

"I see you are leaving us, señor."

THE Ranger nodded. He stood inside the room, away from the open door. His glance made its quick survey of the

A TALL TEXAS TALE

LAZY LONGHORN

THE laziest man I ever knowed was old Esaw McIntosh of Zulch, Texas. When he walked it took a man with good eyesight to tell he wasn't standing still. When any of the town folks wanted to call him on the phone, they had the operator start ringing the day before. If he wanted to know whether or not it was raining, he'd call in the dog and feel of its back.

He was sitting on the front porch one day with a friend when they heard a band.

"There's a parade coming down the street," said the friend.

"And it would be just my luck," old Esaw grumbled, "to be sitting with my back to the street."

—W. L. Hudson

gone from the valley during the time Lazarro went to El Paso with the letter. And there was another who was gone, too. Felipe DeCastro!"

Hatfield could make out nothing in Tarini's shadowed face. He nodded grimly. "I'll think about it," he said.

Cibo Gallo lifted his eyes from the tattered pages of an old newspaper as Hatfield entered his office. It was mid-morning and the heat of the day had already entered that airless, untidy room redolent of sweat and filth. Gallo's grease-empty cells behind the paunchy law officer.

"I have heard stories, Cibo," he said. "It is said that you want me for the killing of Stevens and Pablo. Even, it is said, for the killing of Guy Cabot."

Gallo's eyes widened in injured surprise. "The tongues wag loosely in Agua Dolce," he observed sadly. "The story about Guy Cabot proves it."

"And about Stevens and Pablo?"

Cibo shrugged. "I take your word, señor, that Stevens came to kill you last

at Jim Hatfield's frown. "I am a Spada, Señor. My talents are not limited to playing the piano. I think you recall my presence at the canyon above the Wall?"

"I shall go along," Tarini said. "My help will be invaluable—even to the Lone Wolf." His grin was quick, and modesty never hindered his speech. "It is much better to be with you, than against you!"

Don Clemente turned away and sank into his chair. "I, too, of course will come." His voice was thin and without conviction. "As my niece says, Captain Ramon's treasure is our last hope."

Hatfield shook his head. "To leave Agua Dolce together would not be wise," he said, frowning. "Perhaps we could agree to meet beyond the Wall?"

"There is an old goatherd's shack in a small valley a few miles west of the canyon where we met," Tarini offered. He described the place. "That would make a good rendezvous."

Hatfield nodded. "Tomorrow night, then. I will be there, waiting."

He closed his hand on the map, stuffed it into his pocket. "I shall keep this."

Don Clemente started. "What if something should happen to you, señor?"

It was the girl who answered. "I place my trust in you, Jim Hatfield." Her eyes reflected a growing hope. Impulsively she laid her hand on his arm. "I am glad you came over my garden wall tonight."

CHAPTER VIII

"I'll Be Back"

THEY left together, the Lone Wolf and Tarini, the way they had come, through the garden. Ava waved to them from a window of her room. Don Clemente leaned on his stick by her side, a small, ugly man not particularly pleased with what had happened.

The visitors dropped off the wall, side by side, and straightened in the shadows of the overhanging tree. Goldy came at the Ranger's low whistle.

"You are going back to the hotel tonight?" Tarini asked.

Jim Hatfield nodded.

"It may be dangerous." The young Mexican grinned. "You are a marked man in Agua Dolce."

Hatfield ran his knuckles thoughtfully across his hard jaw. "And you?"

"I have friends in town," Tarini replied carelessly.

"Will you be leaving with Ava and Don Clemente?"

Tarini shook his head. "I will borrow a horse. But I will come to the rendezvous alone. I—I have my reasons."

Hatfield frowned. What did he know of this strange Mexican, other than that he obviously was in love with the Spada girl? Who was he? He talked too well to be an itinerant wanderer. He wore bizarre garb, but he was no gypsy. Hatfield knew that kind too well.

Tarini! The name was a cloak, like *El Cascabel.* It told nothing.

"How did you meet Miss Spada?" he asked bluntly.

The young fellow's eyes had a mischievous glint. "She told you. I heard her playing, even as you—and I was curious. I climbed the wall, and I had a guitar. Have I mentioned it before?" His tone was suspiciously innocent of guile. "I am the world's best—" he paused, eyed the Lone Wolf with sober regard. "Do you play the guitar?"

Hatfield shook his head.

"Then I am the world's best guitar player," Tarini finished. "In Santa Rose, in the province of Chihuahua, I am—" He left the statement hang, and after a moment substituted seriously, "I am older than I seem, Jim Hatfield."

The Lone Wolf nodded. "You are other things, too," he said drily. "Some day I'll want to know."

Tarini's eyes were sober. "Some day I shall tell you. Perhaps after we find the treasure. If there is one."

"You don't believe?"

Tarini lifted his shoulders. "Who can say? Ava believes. That is enough."

night. I myself saw the gun in his hand. Later I examined it and saw that it had been fired. It was plainly a matter of self-defense."

"There was another man with him," Hatfield said coldly. "One of his riders, perhaps—I had no good look at him. I think he carries my bullet in him."

Again Cibo shrugged. "I have heard of no other, wounded or otherwise. If it is so, he is understandably silent, no?"

"And Pablo?"

"Of small matter," Gallo replied. "A good blacksmith, but—"

The callousness of this man irritated the Ranger. "There was a horse in Pablo's shop yesterday!" he growled. "A roan stallion with a white face and a white stocking on his left foot. I have reason to believe it was the horse of the man I am looking for."

"Ah, yes, the man with the tattoo." Cibo's grin was mocking. "Have you found him, señor? Or the horse?"

Hatfield took his anger under control. "I have found more," he said, and he put an emphasis in his voice that indicated extra meaning. He saw Cibo's eyes narraw to the bait, and added coldly: "Your *compadre*, Felipe. Is he here?"

Cibo settled back in his chair. "No. I have not seen him since yesterday."

Gallo shook his head regretfully. "Felipe is the restless one, señor. I—" he glanced with rueful countenance at his bulk—"am content to sit here, out of the sun."

"You don't know where your deputy is?"

"He comes and goes, señor."

"Like Tarini?" Hatfield's voice ground hard on the heels of Cibo's remark. "It strikes me there are too many characters in Agua Dolce who come and go!"

Cibo lazily scratched under his armpit. "What do you want of Felipe?"

"A look at his right arm," Jim Hatfield said. and for a moment after his words died among a silence settled in that dingy room, like a butterfly alighting within the innocently open leaves of a carnivorous plant.

Gallo licked his lips. "I shall tell him, señor—when I see him again."

Hatfield shrugged. He turned away and Cibo's bland voice followed him. "You appear ready for a long journey. What shall I tell Felipe?"

"Tell him I'll be back!" the Ranger said, and his smile was bleak across his tanned face.

Cibo did not move from behind his desk. He saw the big man mount the golden stallion, whirl away from the rack. The spotted mare trotted behind them.

He waited until the sound of the Ranger's going faded into the brooding heat pressing down over Agua Dolce. He was in no hurry. But after awhile he rose and went to the door, and his face was harsh in the beat of sunlight.

"Yes, Jim Hatfield," he muttered, "you are a dangerous man. But you are also a fool!"

IN FRONT of the Lone Wolf, the Wall lifted its steep barrier, blotting out the higher crags of the Diablos. The heat seemed caught within the narrowing confines of the Copperhead, a still, smothering heat that was as one with the brooding silence. It enveloped the big Ranger and he felt the sweat slide down his backside.

At the foot of the Wall, Hatfield gave Goldy and the spotted mare he led a breather. Looking back, he saw no one behind him; but he had not expected open pursuit and this did not trouble him.

He put his attention to the Wall, rising in steep, broken slopes above him.

The Diablos were no longer the unknown, forbidden hell of Captain Ramon's time. Prospectors had left mark of their pick and shovel (and sometimes their bones) among those barren hills, and Jim Hatfield knew of at least one trail used by men in a hurry to get out of Texas.

But they were still a formidable barrier, desolate and mostly waterless. The tide of homesteaders moving across Texas skirted them willingly for easier passage to the north.

The Lone Wolf had been through the

Diablos before. It was a quirk of Fate that he had never visited the valley of the Copperhead.

The legend of the Spada treasure was only one of the dozen stories of gold buried in these hills. But the most persistent. Hatfield took a look at the map he had taken with him. It was old, and the blurred writing across the bottom was in stilted Spanish. He could read little meaning into it, chopped off as it was by the knife which had severed it. But he made out a refernece to a valley (or canyon, he wasn't sure which) "like a piece of green jade dropped by the hand of God." He smiled at the simile.

Captain Ramon, if indeed he had written this, had not been limited in his abilites to the sword alone.

Hatfield put his attention to the landmark on the edge of the torn portion of the map. The Mounted General's peak. The hiding place of Captain Ramon's treasure could not be too distant from this landmark, yet the Lone Wolf knew that a hundred men could search a lifetime in the vicinity and never find a trace of it without a definite guide.

No, the recovery of the old Spada treasure would depend on his gamble; the gamble that the tattooed killer would come after him. And the wry thought came to him then, that though he had come to Agua Dolce on the trail of a killer, Fate had tricked him into a treasure hunt.

Goldy blew noisily and tossed his head. Hatfield tucked the map away and leaned forward to stroke the big sorrel's arched neck. "It's a tough climb, boy. You ready?"

Goldy nodded vigorously.

The spotted mare was game. But Goldy bore the brunt of that climb, pulling her up the steeper slopes as the rope between them tightened and the mare faltered.

The afternoon had worn on as they made the last killing rise. The Ranger pulled aside and let the mare rest. His eyes made their slow survey of the valley below, now reddening in the dying rays of the sun.

The river from which the valley had taken its name coiled below him, gleaming copper. It struck him as an ironic twist that the killer he wanted bore a similar tattoo on his right arm.

His gaze swept the reaches from the town. But he saw no sign of riders, and this puzzled him. Don Clemente and the girl should be on the move by this time. And where was Tarini? The young Mexicans mysterious behavior was not to his liking.

Disappointment touched him with cold fingers. Perhaps he had guessed wrong, after all. Perhaps Cibo Gallo was what he appeared to be, a fat buffoon not interested in maps and mythical treasure.

He shrugged aside his nagging doubts. He would wait at the goat-herder's shack as planned.

He could always return to Agua Dolce, if his gamble didn't pay off!

CHAPTER IX

Rendezvous With Death

GALLO'S deputy, Felipe DeCastro, paced restlessly. The butts of a half-dozen quirleys littered the ground in front of him. He had one between his lips now, forgotten, burning itself out.

Directly behind him the squat shadow of the stone and sod goat-herder's shack was beginning to lengthen. The ruins of a narrow pen reached beyond the shack to the jumbled rock that formed one end of this small valley of stubby desert grass.

Close by those rocks a pool of brackish water glinted in the dying day, disturbed by the tentative muzzling of the big roan stallion he had ridden here—the roan Jim Hatfield had seen in Pablo's blacksmith shop, and it stood alone by the water-hole, to be readily seen by anyone rounding the crust of gray rock leading down into this place.

The strong smell of former occupants still lingered here. Goat droppings, dried

and grayed, were everywhere. The odor was stronger within the dark, deserted shack; Felipe cursed the man who had lived here.

The half-breed paused in his nervous pacing, eying the higher rocks that loomed over the shack. A cool breeze came to flutter the neckerchief at his throat.

Behind the shack, out of sight of the trail, three horses were picketed. Their riders were hidden among those rocks, their rifles trained on that narrow trail.

Jim Hatfield! The most feared Ranger in Texas!

Felipe took a deep breath. There was a time to die for every man—even for the Lone Wolf!

There could be no slipup. Three rifles were waiting for the Ranger to appear on that narrow trail. Even so deadly a man as Hatfield could not beat those odds!

Those had been his orders—"Take no chances, Felipe. He is the most dangerous man ever to come to the Diablos. Remember that! You are no match for him, alone!"

Felipe sneered at the remembered insult. Each man to his own thinking. For himself, he had decided to ignore those orders.

But a thin edge of doubt thrust up through his arrogant refusal. The name of the Lone Wolf carried too many connotations of sudden death for it to be ignored completely. And he himself had witnessed the speed of the Ranger's draw.

No, he would not be foolhardy enough to try to match the Lone Wolf in gun duel! The fact that Jim Hatfield would die immediately after would be small consolation to his bullet-riddled soul!

It was not that which Felipe wanted. Only for Jim Hatfield to live long enough to know who had killed him. Felipe wanted that pleasure, above all.

To his right a figure appeared on the rocks, limned against the paling sky. The man lifted an arm in signal, and Felipe spat out his limp, tasteless cigarette. He waved in answer, and the man dropped out of sight.

And now a chill touched Felipe, a vague and undefinable premonition of death. His lips pulled back against his teeth in snarling defiance to this unbidden thought. He turned to duck into the dark hovel where he had left his rifle.

It was too late to change plans. He would go through with it, as he had boasted. . . .

Don Clemente and his niece took the longer trail into the Diablos. They left by the small rear gate of the hacienda, and at once put a spur of the ridge between them and Agua Dolce. They had left unnoticed, or so the girl thought.

She was wearing man's garb, although the gray flannel shirt did not hide her womanly contours. She rode like a man, erect and easy in saddle. Ahead of her the hills humped up, brown and unpleasing in that barren monotony, but Ava Spada had been born in the valley of the Copperhead and the Diablos were old friends.

Behind them the hacienda and the ridge marking the boundary of the valley faded. They rode as in a lifeless world, beaten into grim submission by the blazing sun.

Somewhere among these forbidding crags her ancestor, the giant Captain Ramon, had fought his way, clad in armor and wielding his heavy sword. The memory of those old tales still thrilled her. She had listened to them at her father's knee—they were a part of her.

Don Clemente rode in dour, brooding silence beside her, a wizened little man younger than his features would suggest. He, too, had changed into practical garb. Also, he wore a pearl-handled Colt thrust inside his waistband, and he carried a knife in a sheath in his boot.

Ava saw this, but it did not surprise her. Her uncle had always been wild, and some of the stories which had drifted back from Mexico after he had quarreled with her father and departed had hinted of violence.

She had never liked her uncle. He had a dark, wild temper. And at times she had caught him looking at her, even while her father was still alive, with the hot gleam of lust in his jet-black eyes.

An ugly little man. He had been born wizened and frail, and the midwife who had attended his birth had said, with callous indifference, that it would have been better if he had not lived.

BUT Clemente Spada had lived, and time had hardened that frail body, marred by one leg shorter than the other, into wiry strength. He remained ugly even as he became bitterly arrogant—and women had found this arrogance displeasing in an ugly man.

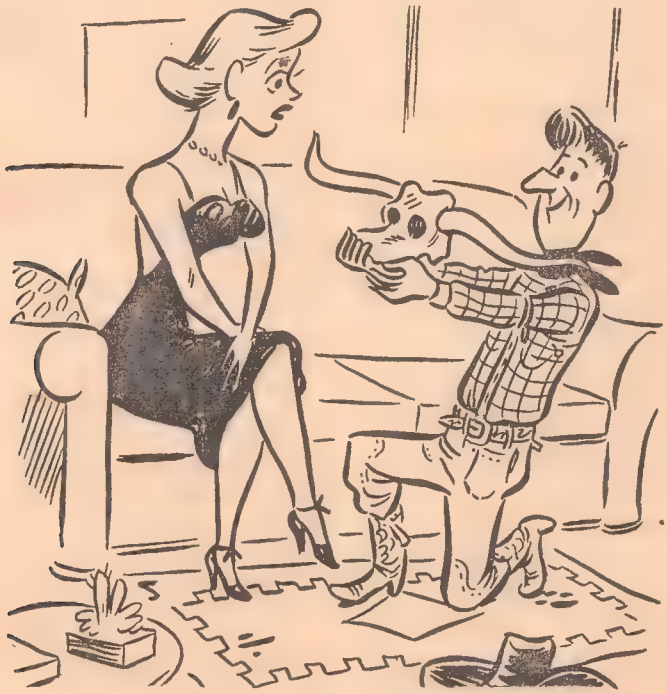
He had never married.

These things Ava Spada knew of the man riding with her, fitted into the pattern of her memory by bits and pieces of gossip.

But he was her uncle, her father's brother, and after Don Furillo's death, alone and stunned by his loss, and feeling helpless in that empty house, she had been glad to see Don Clemente.

He had taken over almost from the first, as though the hacienda still belonged to him. He had dismissed servants and fired vaqueros; in the grief-stricken days that had followed the funeral of Ava's father, she had uttered no protest.

When she had recovered sufficiently to assert herself, it had been too late. There had been few left of the old help, and the small wealth left by her father, mostly in the tangible form of horses and cattle, had been dwindling rapidly.



"For me? Why, Tex, I didn't know you cared that much!"

She had retreated to her room, as much to avoid her uncle as to seek the sanctuary of what had once been warm and familiar. In time she had become almost a prisoner in the big house.

She could have gone away. Don Clemente had urged her to, eying her malevolently during one of her few quarrels with him. But she had been nurtured on the past glories of the Spadas, and stubbornly refused to leave.

These things were forgotten now in the anticipation of what lay ahead. She knew little of the big Ranger who had come to her room last night, other than the usual stories of him. But there was something about Jim Hatfield that inspired trust, and her spirits were high despite the punishing beat of the sun and the promise of a hard journey ahead.

Don Clemente had not uttered a word since their leaving. But he rode alongside now, laying his taloned fingers on her hand in a harsh grip.

"We go this way," he said.

She looked at him in surprise. They were in a pocket in the hills. The sun was lowering in the sky.

"The goat-herder's cabin lies that way," she protested.

He shook his head, his eyes dark and malevolent. "We are not going to the rendezous with Señor Hatfield," he said harshly.

She stared at him. "But you agreed last night. He will be waiting for us."

"He will be dead!" Her uncle's tone had a flat, cruel ring.

Her eyes widened in shocked understanding. She jerked free of his grasp, turned her mare's head around.

Three men riding toward her hemmed her off. A sob broke from her as she held her animal in, and glanced back. Don Clemente caught up with her, grasped the mare's bit irons.

"You fool!" he spat. "Did you think I came back to live on your charity? Were you fool enough to believe I had actually given up all claim to what is rightfully mine for a few paltry dollars thrown to me by my brother?"

She had no answer for him, nor did he expect any. She sat with head bowed while Cibo Gallo rode up and took the bridle from Don Clemente's hand.

"You know the way?" His voice held no oily blandness now. His question, hard put, demanded an answer.

Don Clemente nodded. "Felipe? Where is he?"

"Felipe will join us," Cibo said. "After he has taken care of the Ranger."

Don Clemente's face contorted with violent spasm. "I would have wished to see him die, Cibo. A big man, strong and handsome." His tone was bitterly shrill, beating against the stillness. "Yes, I would have liked to see the Lone Wolf die!"

Cibo shrugged. He touched spurs to his rangy mount, leading the girl's mare behind him.

UNSEEN on the low sand hill behind them Tarini lay on his stomach and watched them head north, away from the rendezvous with Hatfield.

He had kept Ava and her uncle in sight all afternoon, hoping his suspicions would prove groundless. He had been ready to join them when Cibo Gallo and his men appeared. Now he felt the bitter taste of his judgment sicken him.

Alone, he could only jeopardize Ava's life if he attacked them. He had need of the big Ranger now. And then the bleak thought occurred to him that Cibo Gallo would not have been here without Felipe unless his deadly deputy were occupied on other business.

He turned and ran back to his horse waiting in the hollow. Tarini had shed his gypsy garb, and the faded shirt covering his muscular torso and the sombrero over his thick, curly black hair gave him another appearance altogether. More fitting, too, was the Colt in the holster at his hip, and the rifle thrust in his saddleboot.

He mounted and swung the animal westward into the sun. And as he rode he wondered if he were not already to late to help the Lone Wolf.

CHAPTER X

The Tattoed Arm

BLUE twilight marked the trail through the rocks, traced in the beginning by the furtive feet of desert animals trekking to the water-hole in the small valley, and later by the sharp-

hooved goats which had survived here a few brief seasons.

Goldy smelled the water ahead and whickered eagerly; the tired mare behind lifted her head.

It was a narrow trail through rocks piled haphazardly one upon the other, like a discarded stone pile of some Colossus. The air had been still during the heat of the day, but now, as the sun faded from the sky, a breeze stirred, funneling up from the small pocket still unseen by Hatfield.

Little things had kept the Lone Wolf alive through the years of violence which lay behind him. A faint metallic sound, barely heard and hard to analyze, drifted to him now, and he recognized it as the jingling of a spade bit. And Goldy slowed, ears swiveling forward.

Caution brushed shadowy fingers over Hatfield, swung him forward in saddle. Goldy moved on again, almost without a break at the urging of the Lone Wolf's knees. But the big sorrel placed his iron shod hooves down carefully and his long muscles were set for instant action.

They had been together a long time, horse and rider. They worked as a team, each sensing and reacting to the other's moods.

Don Clemente and the girl Ava could have beaten him here, Hatfield thought—or Tarini. But the silence had a weightless quality, like a woman holding her breath. The Lone Wolf's muscles tensed to the prodding sense of danger.

He was too far along this trail to turn back now. He eased forward in saddle, letting his muscles go loose. He stroked the sorrel's neck, hiding in that innocent gesture the cold scrutiny from the corners of his eyes.

Just barely he caught a glimpse of steel among the rocks ahead and above him.

The Ranger kept riding, slouched forward, a tall man seemingly unaware that he had entered a trap. And with each passing moment he wondered why the rifles didn't break the stillness. Soon he would pass beyond their most advantageous angle of fire.

When he came to the bend in the narrow trail and rounded it—the scene before him, gray in the twilight, was still sharp and clear. The shack a hundred feet away, the ruined goat pens—the roan by the water-hole!

For a timeless moment he viewed the scene, seemingly deserted save for that stallion he had seen in Pablo's, standing now with head uplifted, eying him with remote curiousity.

And in that interval he anticipated Felipe! And for that reason Gallo's deputy died!

Hatfield was out of saddle as Felipe stepped through the low doorway of the shack, firing as he emerged. The half-breed had the Ranger lined in his sights from within; he had been ready and waiting. Yet he paid the ultimate price for the arrogance of revealing himself.

His first bullet missed by a hair, and desperation worked his hand as he jacked another round into the breach of his rifle. Now he had only a crouched figure for a target and his second shot merged with the spits of flame at the Lone Wolf's hip.

Felipe never saw the result of his second shot. Lead smashed and burned and tore into his chest, whirling him around, slapping him back against the sod shack.

The rifles in the rocks had their orders. But they were a split second late in taking a hand.

Hatfield dived for the nearest cover, a small hummock of earth, and rolled behind it, his left arm numbed by Felipe's bullet, warm with the flow of blood. The first bullet from the rocks sent its thin spray of sand over him as he crouched.

The others opened up then, revealing their positions and number by livid flashes among the towering rocks. The mound geysered in a half-dozen small eruptions.

Then the rifles fell silent.

BULLET wise, Goldy had broken away with the first shot. He was a blur of gold merging with the rocks beyond the goat pens. The mare, starting to follow, turned aside at the roan stallion's whistle.

Jim Hatfield waited. He had escaped the first closing of the trap. But the men in the rocks held an advantage of more than numbers. They had him pinned down and outgunned. They had but to circle, keep out of Colt range, and eventually one of them would gain a position from which he could reach behind the hummock now protecting Hatfield with his rifle.

The Lone Wolf's jaw tightened grimly. Time could change the picture. But though the sun had set, full dark was still a good half hour away. And the riflemen in the rocks would not need that much time to flush him out.

He poked his hat up on the barrel of his Colt to test his theory. The first slug sprayed dirt over it and the second, following close, ripped high through the crown.

Two men keeping him pinned down, he thought—one man circling.

He settled back and reloaded, holding his Colt with his numbed left hand while he plucked shells with his right. Silence flowed back into the small pocket on the heels of the rifle shots.

The Lone Wolf scanned the rocks to the right. They were out of Colt range then, yet within that of a rifle. It was the logical spot for a man to—

A figure materialized almost as though it had been made tangible by his deduction. A stocky individual in range garb, moving out into the open from between a narrow crack in the rocks. He was out of short gun range and he knew it. He took his time lifting his rifle to his shoulder, sighting.

Hatfield drew his legs under him. To move meant to expose himself to the nearer rifles above him. But he had no choice. And even as he thought this he saw the exposed rifleman stagger and fall limply, his rifle clattering from his hands.

The whipcrack of another rifle rode down from the rocks—but the man who had fired the shot remained unseen.

For a breath of time the Ranger remained caught in the grip of surprise. Then he heard the unseen rifle spit again and again, and hoarse yells went up from the riflemen in the rocks immediately above him.

The Lone Wolf came to his feet. He made a run for those rocks, his Colt at his side. A figure moved into sight, forced into the open by a bullet which ricocheted off the rocks by his head. He jumped down onto a narrow shelf twenty feet above Hatfield and, glimpsing the running Ranger, whirled and bore down with his rifle.

Jim Hatfield fired on the run. The man doubled and fell, his body sliding limply among the rocks.

Somewhere among the rocks behind him, unseen, rifles duelled, their sharp explosions rolling echoes among the hills. Then, abruptly, they fell silent.

Hatfield waited. The shadows stretched long across the small valley.

A man appeared on the rocks above him—a short, stocky fellow with a sombrero dangling on his back. The Ranger's Colt came up before he recognized Tarini. Then he settled back, easing his cocked hammer back to rest.

The young Mexican came down to join him, leaping lightly, a rifle held in his right hand. He glanced at the figure doubled over the rocks, the man Jim Hatfield had killed.

"Three of them, Ranger," he said. "I think that's all."

Hatfield shook his head. "One more," he said. "Felipe."

He turned away, moving in long strides for the shack. The end of the trail, he thought, and he was remembering the light in Bob Thorpe's eyes, just before he had died.

HE CROUCHED beside the half-breed and worked the sleeve up from the deputy's right arm. He stood still, his face going stony with bleak disappointment.

Felipe's right arm was bare.

Tarini came up to stand over him. The Mexican's voice was low. "Last night I told you there were two men who were away from Agua Dolce during the time your friend was killed in El Paso. I forgot the other."

The Ranger looked up. His voice was a bleak whisper in the deepening shadows. *"Don Clemente!"*

Tarini shrugged. "The raid on the Cabots—that could explain the absence of Felipe and Ruch Stevens. But we have only Don Clemente's word that he rode to the county seat."

Jim Hatfield's hands clenched. Blood made thin dark streaks across the back of his left hand and dripped into the dust.

"I heard the first shots as I approached this place—I knew what must have happened," Tarini added. "I was afraid I had arrived too late."

Hatfield shrugged. "I'm glad you didn't, Tarini." His eyes narrowed. "What kept you? Where is Don Clemente—and Ava?"

Tarini told him. "They rode north, and Ava did not go willingly!"

"A ten-mile start—perhaps more," the Ranger muttered. "But they won't know what happened here—they will be in no great hurry. I think we can overtake them, Tarini."

The Mexican nodded, his eyes glittering coldly.

They lingered only to water their horses at the pool and to bind Hatfield's left arm. It was dark when they left. They rode all night.

Morning found them deep in the Diablos, but daylight gave them no glimpse of the riders they sought. Nor did the barren earth offer any visible sign of their passage.

Not until the day was drawing to an end did they run across the first trace of riders. And now the peak which looked like a figure on horseback loomed up against the sky.

Jim Hatfield pulled aside and made a short chopping motion ahead. Tarini squinted.

The riders were motes moving along the base of a black ridge. For long minutes they were visible. Then they seemed to merge into that dark barrier, disappear.

The Ranger's voice was as hard as Toledo steel. "Luck rode with us, Tarini. . . ."

The enclosed valley had changed little in the years since Captain Ramon Spada had made it his tomb. It was still a jewel of green dropped among those barren hills, and the low roar of the falls filled it with a murmur of eternal peace.

Ava Spada had dismounted by the stream. She stood looking down at the massive skeleton still enclosed by rusted armor, the crested helmet by the skull, the pitted sword.

Centuries lay between her and the man who had died here, yet she felt closer to him now than ever before. She closed her eyes and hopelessness came up to choke her. She sank down beside that rusted armour, alone and helpless and afraid.

They had left her there, her uncle and Gallo, to stand beside that skeleton which had given its mute testimony to her faith in the treasure of Los Diablos. To them she offered no threat.

They were beside the falls now, following her uncle's directions, traced from the portion of map he had brought forth after Cibo and his men had joined them. She heard their eager voices, but she did not lift her head.

Don Clemente held back from Gallo and his companion as they disappeared into the crevice in the cliff. He stood small and hunched forward, like some evil bird of prey, black eyes glittering wildly in anticipation.

CLEMENTE had schemed and killed for this moment; and even before. The bitter, torturing years welled up in him now and he felt black madness rise up and threaten to suffocate him.

He was a Spada, too, but he had never had respect for that name. An ugly, deformed child, he had walked in his brother's shadow, whispered about, shunned. His early tantrums had been futile displays of anger, ignored by his parents, and serving only to alienate him from his companions.

Avoided as a boy, and shunned by women as a man, he had spent money recklessly to buy the favors he could not get otherwise. In time he had allied himself with Cibo Gallo and his men to raid

his own herds. It had been during an uncontrollable fit of anger that he had affirmed what Don Furillo had long suspected. He had been forced, then, to accept his brother's terms—sign away his legal title to the Spada estate in return for money which he had quickly squandered in the brothels and cantinas of Mexico.

He had come back to the Copperhead ready to lick his brother's hand. He had arrived at night, unnoticed, and chance had brought him to a meeting with Don Furillo under the walls of the hacienda. In a fit of black rage he had killed his brother, and had taken out a dark, twisted frustration by multilating his brother's features.

He had remained out of sight long enough to give validity to his story that he had heard of his brother's death, then he had taken over at the hacienda. Legally he had nothing—he was at the mercy of his niece's charity. So he had come to terms with Gallo to force her into final bankruptcy through failure to pay back taxes. The hacienda, with the wealth of land it represented would be split between them.

The letter from El Paso had been an event he had not counted on.

He had made a pretense of not believing, and had sent Lazarro to El Paso at Ava's insistence. He and Vittorio had followed. He had wanted a man with him, for at heart Don Clemente was a coward —and Stevens and Felipe had been busy elsewhere.

He had not reckoned on the grim Nemesis who had trailed them from El Paso. Involunarily Clemente glanced toward the valley entrance where Gallo, more cautious, had insisted on leaving one of his men on guard.

The Lone Wolf was dead! In his heart Don Clemente felt certain of this. Felipe could not have failed. The deputy and three men had only to wait for Hatfield, and that meddling gypsy, Tarini, to ride into their trap—a trap which he had set himself on the night Hatfield had revealed himself.

He swung around as Gallo's hoarse shout reached him. The big man and his companion came into view, hauling a heavy chest between them. They placed it down, a dozen feet from Clemente, and Gallo crouched to wrench open the moldy lid.

The don heard Cibo suck in his breath. On the other side of the chest Cibo's companion stared, open-mouthed.

Gallo said to the little man, "It is true, Don Clemente! The map did not lie. A fortune!"

As a bullet hit him in his massive paunch his mouth came open, as though his jaw had become unhinged. He took a step forward toward Don Clement's smoking gun. The second bullet stopped him. He looked down in amazement, his huge head sagging. Then his knees buckled.

His companion made a belated grab for his holstered gun. The don's laughter rode with the flat explosion of the gun in his own hand.

His shot bounced back from the high walls. But instead of fading it seemed to multiply, to concentrate at the narrow canyon entrance.

He did not understand at first. He turned to listen. He saw his niece come to her feet, look toward the gap. And even when he saw two riders emerge into the valley, even as he stared at the tall figure on the golden Stallion, his mind refused to understand.

NOT until the Lone Wolf had covered half the distance to the stream did Don Clemente recover from that stupefying surprise.

Ava Spada was running to meet the big Ranger who was in the lead of Tarini by several lengths. Something burst in the don's warped brain then, and sent him running after the girl, as if impelled by some terrible sense of injustice, known only to himself, to kill his brother's daughter.

He fired as he ran. Ava stumbled and fell forward and lay still.

The Lone Wolf swerved Goldy to avoid trampling her. His Colt cut down at the

small ugly figure emptying a gun at him. He felt the don's bullet brush past his face, then Clemente was shoved around like a rag doll by Hatfield's slugs. He fell on his hands and knees a few feet from the motionless girl. In a last senseless effort to destroy, he drew his knife and started to crawl to her.

Hatfield's last shot stiffened him. He died with his right arm outstretched, fingers around the handle of his knife.

Tarini had dismounted in a flying leap. He had the girl cradled in his arms, anxiety in his dark face. She moaned and twisted, then seeing his face above her, she smiled with relief.

Jim Hatfield dismounted. He bent over Don Clemente's body, lifted that arm still clutching a knife, and pulled back the sleeve. He eyed the grim tattoo of a coiled copperhead with bleak dispassion. He was thinking of Bob Thorpe then, and hoping Bob would now rest easy.

Tarini's voice turned him. "She's all right, Lone Wolf." His voice held a great relief. "Bullet glanced along her ribs, under her arm here." He added irrelevantly, "Don Clemente was always better with a knife."

They camped that night in the canyon, after the Ranger and Tarini had brought out the second Spada chest from Captain Ramon's hiding place. There was more than enough here to restore the Spada hacienda to its former glory.

They left in the morning, the chests securely lashed to the horses that had been ridden by Cibo Gallo and Don Clemente. They paused once to look back to the black ridge which hid the bones of Captain Ramon Spada, and the bodies of those who would keep him company.

Tarini edged his mount close to Goldy. Ava Spada rode with him, held within the protection of his right arm.

"Once you asked me who I was, Ranger Hatfield," he said. "There is no reason now why I should not tell you." His left hand stroked the girl's head possessively. "I am Mario Santiago y Gomez. My family had been long time friends of the Spadas. I used to visit them as a child." He smiled at the stir of the girl in his arm, at the wonderment in her eyes.

"I came to Agua Dolce after I heard of Don Furillo's death. I had heard ugly stories in Mexico of Don Clemente. So I came as Tarini."

Ava's voice was soft. "And as Tarini I fell in love with you."

Jim Hatfield grinned. "And why not? Doubtlessly he is the greatest lover in all Mexico."

Tarini's smile matched the Ranger's. "An understatement, señor. I am the greatest lover in all the—" His eyes narrowed then and he considered the tall, broad-shouldered figure before him. "In all Mexico," he murmured, and tightened his arm about the girl.

Jim Hatfield raised his hand in farewell. The Spada heritage was in good hands.

"Reckon you two won't be needing me from here on."

They watched him turn south, a tall, hard man riding the lone, hard trails of Texas.

Featured Next Month

GUNMEN PLAY THE LONG ODDS

Another Thrilling Jim Hatfield Novel

By JACKSON COLE

THE AVENGER

by CHARLES PUTKEY

When they shot his unarmed brother, Hank vowed he'd see them in Hell

FROM the porch of the ranch house Hank Striker watched vagrant clouds in the western sky cling tenaciously to the last rays of the departed sun. Wearily he stamped dust from his boots and walked into the living room of the adobe. The oiled paper of the windows were squares of gray mist floating in the blackness of the room. He lit the kerosene lamp that hung from the ceiling. This was a mistake. Remorselessly the pale yellow light fell on the dust that lay thick on the furniture, on the clothes scattered aimlessly about the room, on the heaped ashes in the fireplace.

Quickly Hank blew out the light and sprawled on the couch. He was tired. Cleaning the room was too much of a chore even to think about when he was faced with the problem of getting supper. Food was his immediate worry. The rumbling pangs in his stomach made that quite clear.

With a practiced hand Hank rolled a smoke, lit it. The momentary light of the match shone dully on his straight, rusty

"Look at the sun," Hank cried, "then tell me I'm mad!"

hair; it glinted in his clear blue eyes. His was not a handsome face. His cheeks were too drawn, his chin too prominent. It was a face of character though—the face of a man who could accept sorrow or joy with equal ease.

Hank watched the thin line of cigarette smoke trickle upward, dissipating itself in darkness. He had a lot in common with that smoke—going nowhere, in no great hurry to get there. At twenty-nine he was still living life alone. That wasn't counting Charlie, of course. In his way, Charlie was company, but a brother couldn't take away the kind of "aloneness" that was eating away at Hank Striker's heart.

Hank figured he needed a wife. He'd gotten to thinking that way a lot lately—especially around suppertime. Hank was a fair hand at fixing a mess of bacon and beans, but even a tasty dish of bacon and beans gets tiresome after a few years. A good supper set before him every night, Hank sometimes felt, was reason enough for a man to marry—even if marriage didn't offer those added attractions which, being a red-blooded young man, Hank found equally compelling.

THERE weren't many eligible girls in town, but those who were all had one thing in common—they'd all turned down Hank Striker's offer of marriage at least once. Not that Hank much blamed them. Sometimes a woman will marry most any kind of man, except one with half a heart. Sarah Jane, Julie, Abbie—they'd all feared that part of Hank's heart was out on the desert. Maybe it was. Maybe that was why he roamed the desert as much as he did—to find a part of himself he had never known.

Hank got to his feet when he heard horses coming up the trail from the river. From the porch he saw that the horseman in the lead was Sid Morgan, plainly identified even in the gathering night gleam by the palamino he rode and the white stetson he wore. Probably coming to bargain for the ranch again. Sid wanted Hank's Bar Four bad. There was enough graze on Hank Striker's ranch to fatten a thousand head of Morgan cattle—a far cry from the ninety-four critters Hank had counted in his own herd that very morning. From one end to the other it had been a discouraging day. And now as much as he hated to sell to the big cattleman, Sid Morgan was going to catch him with his resistance way down.

Behind Morgan rode the sheriff and Peanuts Kruger. A gunslick brought into the valley by Morgan and reputed to be a killer, Peanuts stuck closer to Sid Morgan than his shadow. Valley folk couldn't understand why Sid needed a bodyguard. It was just one more thing that made the people of the valley fear Morgan. Sid controlled the sheriff like a puppet on a string; he hired his cowhands big and mean. Any time Morgan took the notion he could make himself the law of Dominion Valley.

The three riders reined up and dismounted. Sid shook the porch with his bulky body, his powerful, arrogant stride. His broad face was humorless as he mounted the steps. Hank wondered. This was not Sid Morgan's bargaining mood.

"My son is dead," Sid said abruptly, without emotion. "He was shot down in the Silver Dollar in town." Morgan's almond eyes were bloodshot—the only sign of weakness Hank Striker had ever seen on Sid's hard face.

The news did not surprise Hank. Young Rex Morgan had been an arrogant bully, just begging for a case of lead poisoning. What surprised Hank was that they'd ridden out to the Bar Four to tell him.

"Charlie did it," the sheriff said.

"We want you to ride with the posse," Sid Morgan said quickly, giving Hank no time for questions.

"You loco?" Hank asked bitterly. "You think I'd help track down my own brother?"

Sheriff Richardson said, "He tried to make it north to Hectorville. We headed him off into the badlands. We've got the pass staked out. He can't get back into the valley."

Hank Striker scratched the back of his left hand. His hand didn't itch, but he

had to do something to ease the frustration rising within him. He knew the desert so well. The shortest way out was north—a hundred miles of burning sand, lava flows and treacherous canyons. A hundred waterless miles.

"We need you for a guide," Sid Morgan said. "You know those badlands like a book."

"And if I do find him, what then?" Hank asked.

"He'll get a trial," Sid Morgan said. "I promise that. There were witnesses."

Witnesses! Hank knew what kind of witnesses they'd be. They'd have seen what Sid Morgan told them to see. The jury box would vote as Sid Morgan told them to vote. One word from Morgan could hang Charlie!

Hank knew that he was rashly accusing Sid Morgan of being vengeful. He had no evidence that Sid had ever acted vengefully. Morgan might want only justice; he might see to it that Charlie got a fair trial.

But fair trial or not, on the desert Charlie had no chance. On the desert there was no judge, no jury. There was only the bright executioner in the sky.

Turning, Hank Striker went into the house. He buckled on his gun belt and filled two large canteens at the pump in the kitchen. He carried them to the barn and saddled Blue Lady.

FOR several miles the four men rode along the river that skirted the western edge of Dominion Valley. At a spot where the river was streaked white with shallows, they crossed. The trail from the river lead up through terrain increasingly thick with sage and greasewood. They avoided a vast slide of broken red rock that funneled down from the base of the cliffs that faced the valley. Between two towering stone walls they made their way up a rocky slope that was the only access to the desert from the valley.

On top of the plateau four men were waiting for them. Hank recognized them as hands from Morgan's ranch—all with bad reputations. It was plain enough to Hank Striker now that this was Sid Morgan's private show.

"You lead the posse," Sid informed Hank, "but don't go getting ideas about not finding your brother. It's a crime to protect a murderer—a hanging crime."

Hank turned his horse and headed it in the direction Charlie had taken. Even in the moonlight, the tracks of Charlie's horse were as clear as print in a book. They didn't need Hank to lead the posse; they'd held up their pursuit of Charlie for two, maybe three hours just to get his brother in on the party. Why? Did they figure Charlie would surrender without a fight if Hank were with the posse? Hank could think of no other reason.

The posse headed north toward a fantastically beautiful land carved out of colored stone. This was the land that Hank knew and loved. He wondered if he could ever love a woman as deeply. For here it was, amid beauty and solitude, that Hank found peace. For days, until the water carried by his pack horses threatened to give out, Hank would ride through this vast eroded land, ever fascinated by its constantly changing beauty. The desert seemed a part of him, a complement of his existence.

At times, bent on building up the ranch, he'd tried to resist its call. He'd always failed. In a confusion of desire and despair he would pack up and ride into the desert, leaving the ranch to Charlie's care. But Charlie hadn't been cut out for ranch work. After a day or two of frustrating effort, Charlie would saddle his own horse and head for town. The ranch their father had left them had steadily gone to pot.

People reckoned Hank Striker a fool for thinking there was gold in the badlands. He let them think that; it was an explanation they could accept, however much they ridiculed its folly. At first, he had gone into the desert in search of gold. He had found something far more precious than gold—himself. He had never tried to explain this. He knew that if he did, people would try to lock him

up as an out-and-out lunatic

Maybe he *was* mad. Maybe the only reasonable thing to expect from life were good healthy cattle, well-prepared hot meals at night and a woman to share a man's bed If these were the sane things of life, Hank counted himself mad. But his was a madness he could not, would not destroy. In the life he led—lonely and bitter for the most part—he found fragments of happiness he had never dreamed existed.

Four hours on the desert brought them to the edge of the vast eroded plain which lay across their path. They made their way down into canyons walled in by great arches of purple stone. They rode on into a natural maze of canyons interlaced in confusing, blind patterns. Several times Charlie had ridden up canyons that ended in blank walls of stone. In these places his trail had doubled back on itself. Occasionally the tracks showed he had galloped his horse. Except for these brief outbursts of panic, Charlie had controlled himself well.

At sunrise the trail led up out of the canyons and onto the face of the desert again. Here the posse stopped for food and water. Each horse carried two large containers of water. The men had brought small rations of oats for the horses, and beef and biscuits for themselves. The men drank sparingly; they ate almost without conversation.

AFTER a brief rest they were in the saddle again. They rode into an endless sea of sand, broken only by occasional spires of red rock. Several times they crossed great flows of black lava sand. It was a forbidding land, barren and sterile. Never had Hank Striker ventured this far into the desert. But they were nearing their goal—that was apparent from the tracks they followed. Charlie's horse was staggering, almost finished.

With the sun almost directly overhead and burning down on them like a merciless torch, they heard a solitary pistol shot. It echoed over the desert from not more than a mile ahead.

"He's killed hisself," Peanuts Kruger muttered.

Sid Morgan spurred his horse up alongside of Hank's. "Think he shot himself?" he asked anxiously. Sweat stained his hat, and his shirt was soaked under the armpits. The ride was a killer for the older man, but he sat straight in his saddle. Grim determination marked every line of his body, every feature of his face.

"There was only one shot," Hank said. "He used it on his horse."

Sid Morgan nodded. The tension in his facial expression disappeared, his lips curved thinly in a faint smile.

Behind a hill of sand they found the dead horse. Boot prints led from the carcass to a shelf of red rock that cropped up through the sand. As they rode for the tablelike formation, the posse men drew their weapons. Only Hank Striker rode forward unarmed.

"Think he'll fight?" Sid called to Hank.

"He's in no shape to fight," Hank replied tersely.

They found Charlie Striker sitting under an overhanging ledge of rock, huddled in the scanty shade it afforded. His eyes were hollow; his lips crusted with sand. Hank dismounted, took a canteen from his horse and walked to Charlie. Feebly the boy smiled at his brother. Hank held the cantee, letting Charlie drink in sips. He wiped the dust from the boy's lips and brushed the hair from his eyes.

Then Charlie saw the sheriff and Sid Morgan standing behind his brother. The smile left his lips; fear crept into his eyes. Sheriff Richardson bent over and pulled the Colt from Charlie's holster.

Hank said, "I helped them track you down, Charlie. I had to. You didn't have a chance out here."

A smile returned to Charlie's face—a pathetic, hopeless twisting of his colorless lips. "You done wrong, Hank," he said. "You should have let me die. I don't fancy hanging."

"They haven't hanged you by a long shot, Charlie," Hank said grimly.

"Rex drew on me, Hank," the younger brother said. "He was drunk and riled

up because I beat his time with Clara. God help me, Hank, he drew on me!"

"Sure, kid." Hank placed a hand lightly on Charlie's shoulder. Again he put the canteen to Charlie's lips, allowing him to drink more deeply.

"Now that this touching brotherly reunion is over," Sid Morgan's voice boomed behind them, "let's get the trial started."

Hank Striker surrendered the canteen to his brother. He got to his feet. Slowly he turned to face Morgan.

"What do you mean, trial?" Hank asked sharply.

"Just that," Sid replied. "We caught ourselves a murderer and before we string him up, we aim to give him a fair trial—just like I promised he would get."

"What right *you* got to try Charlie?" Hank cried.

Sid Morgan smiled. "These boys just got together and elected me judge of this township. They elected Mr. Richardson here prosecuting attorney, and Mr. Myers defense attorney. I just appointed Hughey and Whitey and Ford as the jury. If you've got any objections, Hank, just take them up with Peanuts. Peanuts is the bailiff."

Grinning childishly, Kruger stepped ahead of Sid Morgan. He was a thin man with hollow cheeks and large, protruding eyes. A comical, almost pathetic face. But there was no pathos, no comedy in the .45 that hung heavy on his hip.

"I handle complaints good," Peanuts said. "Nobody complains twice."

THEY were goading Hank to draw on Peanuts. If he did, he was a dead man. A nice legal dead man, in nobody's way, on nobody's conscience. But Hank Striker made no move for his gun. If anything, he was clumsy with a Colt. He stood no chance against the trained gunman standing before him.

"I've got no complaints," he said.

"Good," Sid Morgan said warmly. He sat down on a flat rock and rubbed his hands vigorously. He was breathing heavily, his eyes glistened in anticipation. "Seeing as how there's no complaints, we'll get the trial started. First off we'll hear from the prosecuting attorney."

Sheriff Richardson's face plainly showed that he was not amused by this farce of justice. The sheriff was a man of obvious tastes; he did not share the subtle enjoyment. Sid Morgan was taking in this cat-and-mouse game. "I don't know what we're fooling around like this for," he blurted. "I say let's hang the varmint and get the hell out of this heat."

Sid Morgan smiled and nodded to Pete Myers, a cowhand on Sid's ranch. Pete was a born clown. Graciously he bowed to the judge and the members of the jury. "Your Honor, gentlemen of the jury, in the face of the brilliant speech made by the prosecuting attorney, I guess my case is plumb lost. However, I want to point out a flaw in the prosecutor's argument. Just where in hell are we going to hang the defendant when there ain't a tree within thirty miles of here?"

"The defense has made a pertinent observation," Sid Morgan said, nodding in agreement. "And now that both sides have finished their pleas, we'll get the jury to decide just how guilty the defendant is."

The three members of the jury huddled for a moment. They punctuated their deliberation with a few coarse laughs. When they had reached their decision they turned and Hughey Thompson stepped forward. "Your Honor," he said, trying unsuccessfully to keep a grin off his face, "we find the defendant guilty as sin."

Sid Morgan got to his feet. His face was humorless. In a voice that was grave and solemn, he said, "The defendant will stand and face the court."

Weak from the sun and weak from fear, Charlie Striker struggled to his feet. He swayed and reached for the support of the rock wall behind him.

"It was me or him!" he cried at Sid Morgan. "He drew on me. I swear it!"

Morgan said nothing. Slowly he drew his Colt. He moved with calculated deliberateness—his every motion an open invitation for Hank to try and stop him.

That would have been the easy way

out—for Morgan—Hank's dying there on the desert with his brother. But Hank meant to live. He had to live. His life had a purpose now, a grim, unreasoning purpose.

Slowly Hank Striker backed away from his brother, leaving the boy to face Sid Morgan alone. Hank did not turn his head; he wanted to see it all. He wanted this moment burned into his memory. When he should have forgotten all else, he wanted to remember this.

"Don't leave me, Hank!" Charlie sobbed. "Don't lea—"

The shot was like a clap of thunder on the empty desert. The slug caught Charlie squarely in the chest; the force of it hurled him backwards, sprawling him in the sand—a lifeless, broken thing. Hank stared at the stain that slowly spread over the front of Charlie's blue shirt. Fear, love, pity—all these were gone now. One emotion alone possessed Hank Striker. Hate!

"Court adjourned."

Through senses blinded with hate, Hank heard Morgan's cynical pronouncement. He turned from his brother's body and saw Morgan slip his Colt carelessly back into holster. Self-satisfaction was etched in every line of the big cattleman's face. At this moment of Sid Morgan's triumph, Hank Striker silently pronounced a death sentence over the older man. He swore he'd live to see Morgan dead.

PEANUTS KRUGER strode up to Hank and boldly pulled the Colt from Hank's holster. "This is doing you no good," he said. "You're afraid to use it." He laughed. The men standing behind him laughed.

Morgan and his men mounted. "If you're coming with us," Sid said to Hank, "get on your horse."

"I'd like to pile some rocks over my brother," Hank said.

"Suit yourself," Sid answered. "If you stay, we've got to take your canteens with us. Can't afford to leave water out here on the desert."

Hank wondered why they didnt' kill him and get it over with. What weird twisting of Sid Morgan's mind demanded justification for his death? If it were provocation they wanted, they'd get none. He'd give them no cause to kill him. He'd crawl before Sid Morgan, lick his boots. He had to stay alive, regardless of how much he degraded himself in the process.

He mounted and rode with the others. He did not look back at the body that lay exposed to the ravages of the desert. . . .

An evening wind sprang up, filling the air with biting particles of sand. The men drew their kerchiefs over their faces and rode with their heads bent into the wind. The tracks they had made that morning were soon obliterated. Steadily they moved southward into the oppressive wind.

Night came quickly over the desert. There was almost no transition from day to night. One moment the sky was blue; the next, seemingly, it was black. Soon after nightfall they reached the edge of the system of canyons through which they had to pass. Before entering the maze, they stopped for food and water. The men rested quietly in the sand as the silver moon rose over the desolate land.

In a brief conference, it was decided to push on through the night. Despite their utter exhaustion, and that of their mounts, the posse could not afford to stop. Their pursuit of Charlie had taken them further into the desert than they had planned. Their water was almost gone. By riding at night the horses would need less water to get them through to the valley.

As they headed down the rocky slopes and the stone walls lifted about them, Hank Striker learned the reason he was still alive. Once again he was leading the posse. He knew this terrain; the others were counting on him to get them through quickly.

As they rode through the twisting canyons, Hank occasionally glanced back at the line of horsemen he was leading. They rode like dead men, slumped in their saddles, their heads rolling feebly with the motion of their mounts. Only Hank

Striker remained alert. The hard stone of hatred in his breast killed the weariness of his body. The burning desire for revenge kept his mind lucid.

Once he had led them through the treacherous canyons, Hank knew that they would kill him. He would no longer be of use to them. He would, in fact, be a threat to their lives. He had witnessed the murder of his brother. Sid Morgan was no fool; he could not afford to let Hank live.

The short night was almost at an end when they rode out of the last canyon. The moon was directly overhead. Still they did not stop. For two hours they urged their horses forward. Finally, as dawn outlined the purple eastern peaks against a slate sky, Sid Morgan ordered a halt. What water they had left did little to assuage the great thirst of the horses. The men held back barely enough water to wet their own lips. They could wait. They knew water was directly ahead. The horses did not.

After watering the mounts, the men made no attempt to rest or to mount. They stood, like so many dirty animals, staring unfeelingly at Hank Striker. This, then, was the spot Sid Morgan had chosen as Hank's place of execution.

"Hank," Sid said dully, his voice too filled with fatigue for any inflection of emotion, "I can't afford to let you ride into town. I don't think you like me, Hank. I can't have people not liking me."

"Especially not when they own a nice piece of grazing land you want?" Hank asked.

IT WAS obvious to him now why they had got him to ride with the posse. With both the Striker brothers missing in the desert, the Bar Four would be up for grabs. And Sid Morgan was the grabbing man in Dominion Valley.

Sid Morgan smiled, rubbing the stubble on his chin in amusement. "Can't blame a man for mixing business with pleasure, can you, Hank?"

Hank replied politely, "I'd be the last one who'd want to see you miss out on your fun, Sid."

Sid frowned. He had seen brave men die. Some had met death fearlessly, some defiantly. None, however, had faced death with the kind of smile that was on the face of Hank Striker.

"I'm a sporting man, Hank," he said, scrutinizing the features of the doomed man. "I'll give you a sporting chance. I'll give you back your gun and you can draw on Peanuts. Peanuts got his feelings hurt when I done in your brother myself."

"By all means," Hank said, almost laughing, "let's not keep Peanuts out of the fun."

Kruger stepped ahead of Sid Morgan. He stood before Hank Striker, his feet planted firmly in the sand, his thumbs hooked in his belt.

"You don't seem to get the idea, mister," he said. "I'm going to kill you."

"Dead men don't kill dead men," Hank replied quickly.

"You talk loco, mister," Peanuts said. "When you killed my brother, I swore I'd see you all dead. I sentenced you all to death. I was the judge, I was the jury. In a few minutes you'll face your executioner. In a few hours you'll all be dead and your souls will be damned in hell!"

Peanuts fell back before the bitter tirade. Hatred spilled out of Hank like a stream of molten steel. It was overwhelming in its surge, brittle with fear. The confidence with which Hank spoke frightened him; he felt Hank Striker's vengence closing about him, stifling him.

"Look at the sun," Hank cried. "See where it's rising? Take a good look and then tell me that I'm mad."

The sun, just appearing over the jagged peaks to the east, was on the right of the direction in which they had been riding. It should have been on the left. They had been traveling north—back into the desert. In an instant, the men of the posse knew what had happened. In the maze of canyons, Hank Striker had led them in a circle, had taken them back in the direction from which they had ridden. They were deep in the desert, and their

water was gone.

"I'm getting out of here!" Peanuts cried hoarsely. He stumbled to his horse and mounted. Panic took possession of his body. He spurred his horse forward, whipping it fiercely with the ends of the reins. The horse staggered, then plunged ahead.

The panic spread. The sheriff ran for his horse. Hughey and Whitey followed. Momentarily Ford stood motionless, his eyes fastened piteously on Sid Morgan. But Sid was no longer a leader. His lips worked in nervous spasms, his eyes were narrowed with fear.

Ford saw that he was on his own, that there was no one left to lead him. Pathetically he mounted and rode almost aimlessly after the others. The dust settled, the riders disappeared into the glare that hung over the desert. Hank was alone with Sid Morgan. The others were gone —out of Hank's mind now. They stood no chance of getting through to the valley. In five, in ten miles they'd all be dead.

Hank looked at Sid Morgan. He wondered why the big man had not gone with the rest. As he watched, he saw the terror in Morgan's eyes slowly disappear. A hint of remembered arrogance stiffened Morgan's features.

"I'm sticking with you, Hank. You know where there's water. You wouldn't have come back here if there wasn't water."

DESPERATELY the older man clung to hope. Was life so precious to Sid Morgan that he had to grasp for illusionary straws such as that? Where on this burning plain did he imagine there was water? But ill-conceived as it was, Hank still had to destroy that last morsel of hope. The thirst for vengeance within him demanded that he see Morgan irrevocably faced with death.

Hank walked to Sid Morgan. With a quick motion he drew the Colt from the older man's holster. Morgan made no attempt to stop him.

"Don't kill me, Hank," Sid begged. "I promise—"

Abruptly Hank turned his back on the pleading man. He walked to the two horses. He fondled Blue Lady behind the ear. The horse lowered her head and Hank put a .45 slug in the base of her skull. Without a sound Blue Lady dropped.

Sid Morgan's horse bolted at the shot. Hank brought the palamino down with two quick shots, one of which broke its neck. Hank walked to where it lay writhing and fired twice into its head.

He had not killed the horses out of pity; pity was gone from him entirely. He had shot the horses to blast hope dramatically from Sid's desperate clutch. With the horses dead, their doom was certain. No words could have done this as effectively. Facing Morgan again, Hank saw that he had succeeded. The big man stood staring at the dead animals, his eyes glazed with terror. His face was devoid of character, flabby and old. His jaw sagged, one eyelid twiched uncontrollably.

Hank jammed the Colt back into Sid Morgan's holster. "It's quick death," he said. Then he turned and started north.

Sid Morgan tried to follow. But the strength that had driven him to avenge his son's death was gone. He was a fumbling hulk of a man, staggering and clumsy. He couldn't keep pace with Hank. He tried to run, and fell.

Hank Striker didn't break stride even when he heard the shot. He did not look back. The desert was silent now. Solitude closed about him, he was at peace.

The sun bore down on him with unbearable heat. He felt sweat trickling down his chest, his life soaking drop by drop into his shirt. In the haze ahead he searched for the shelf of red rocks. He was desperately tired. He wanted to lie beside Charlie and rest. Before he slept, he wanted to describe to his kid brother the beauty of the land about them—to tell of the desert sand that shimmered black and red under the noon sun and which lay glistening like a plain of silver under the midnight moon.

These were the things he would tell Charlie.

a story by **W. J. REYNOLDS**

An arrow whipped past Bill as he threw the pot at the bowman

BACKWOODS MAN

Bill Bonner had never been much of a fighter

till the day the Comanches cornered his wife

BILL BONNER had a worry. A nerve-ragging, thorn-in-the-side worry that grew worse instead of better, and Kate was beginning to give him little side glances when she thought he wasn't noticing. It scared Bill Bonner into a wild-eyed shiver just to think that Kate might find out that his worry wasn't just a worry but a fact.

It would seem that a man who owned three hundred and twenty acres of good east Texas bottomland, most of it beyond the flood stage, a snug cabin, a snug barn, a corral, and twenty cleared acres in cotton and corn in his first year at farming wouldn't have such a worry. That he would be free swinging and grinning and happy.

But not young Bill Bonner. It was mostly his brothers' fault, and Bill knew this vaguely, but this thing had been drummed into him so early that, when he thought of it as his brothers' fault that seemed another weakness, as he put it aside, and went on worrying.

Bill Bonner had come from a big family,

all boys, and he was the youngest. And the runt of the family—if Bill's five ten and a hundred and seventy pounds could be called runty. But the hulking brothers had bullied Bill, thrashed him occasionally when he bowed up on them and told him he was a runt and couldn't do anything right unless he had a big brother showing him how. For a minute or two, during the last fights he had with them he had thought he was winning, but he hadn't been. They had whipped him, then fussed over him like a bunch of mother hens and called him "little old Bill."

As they had married and the land had been parceled out, all the good prairie land near town was taken before it came Bill's turn, all that had been left was this half section in the Buck River bottom. Bill grumbled some about it, but he'd been secretly pleased. He liked the deep woods, and being twenty miles away from his bullying, bossing brothers. If he'd acted pleased one of them would have upset his ownership, figuring in their way that if little old Bill was pleased it was bad for him.

THEY'D laughed mightily when Bill had announced his intention of moving there, after he got married. They'd thought it was a mighty good joke and had roared accordingly. But they'd pitched in and helped him build and clear his acres for farming.

"Just wait!" Big Rance had bellowed, "until some Comanche war party steals little old Bill's horses and grabs him by the seat of his britches! Bill will clear a hundred-yard swath all the way to town!" They'd roared with laughter again.

Kate had squeezed Bill's arm. "Bill, you'll never have any peace from them until you whip one or two of them. They love you, but still think you're a baby."

"I've tried often enough," Bill had told her glumly.

"You will, Bill," Kate had said confidently.

Kate's confidence only increased Bill's worry and scared him some more. If he let Kate down . . . Bill shuddered. He worried and he fretted all through planting and working his crop.

His cotton was now nearly pocket high and he was risking one more plowing, running out the middles. It would be the last, another plowing might damage it.

Bill Bonner heaved his plow around at the end of the rows, hollered "Whoa!" at his mule and sleeved sweat from his face. He fanned himself with his flop-brimmed hat and gauged his shadow's position on the ground. High noon. Time to go in for dinner. He was nearly through with the cotton, another two hours would do it. He'd lay up during the heat of the afternoon, and come back about two hours before dark to finish it.

He took out the mule and led him toward the cabin a quarter-mile away. He put the mule in the stable, fed it, then went to the walled-in spring to slosh happily in the cool water. He went toward the house then, letting his face and arms dry by themselves, and wondered why Kate hadn't poked her head out the door to tell him she'd thrown out the groceries.

He had nearly reached the cabin when he heard her groan. He was running instantly, fear blossoming inside him. Kate! Oh, God, if something had happened to Kate and he couldn't take care of it!

He burst into the cabin. Kate lay on the floor, near the stove. Her dress was pulled up, exposing a huge blackish bruise and swollen lump on her leg above the knee. Her face was white, her bosom and shoulders sweat-drenched.

She said calmly, but weakly, "I broke my leg, Bill. I was hanging curtains and fell. My leg hit the stove."

Bill Bonner couldn't move at first, then he was suddenly galvanized. He jerked the mattress off the bed, put it down beside Kate, got her onto it and lifted the whole thing back to the bedstead in a smooth burst of speed that brought only one choked scream out of Kate. Then he stood looking at her, shaking and sweating.

Kate was a wise girl. She had known Bill and Bill's family for a lot of years. Bill Bonner's secret worry wasn't as secret

as he thought.

When she got her breath back, she said, still calmly, "Bill, you'll have to set and splint the break yourself. You could ride the twenty miles to Sulphur Valley and still not find Doc Glenn. You'll have to, Bill. Bill!"

That last "Bill" would have done credit to any army's colonel. Bill jumped, his eyes lost some wildness, and he hiked to the wood pile for splints. He was back in record time with narrow strips of cedar, straight, and with the ridges smoothed with sure strokes of a sharp ax. His jaw jutted.

"Kate, stuff the pillow in your mouth." He watched her with steady blue eyes until she had her mouth full of a corner of the feather pillow. Then he did what he had to do, and his hands were gentle and steady even with Kate's muffled screams. He splinted the leg then and bedded it on a pillow.

HE WAS drenched with sweat and weak as a kitten when he was done. He got cold water from the spring and bathed Kate's face and neck and put cold compresses on the leg. He didn't say so, but he was going to get Kate a doctor. He cursed himself for a fool in bringing her way out here in the bottom. She could die of blood poisoning before he could find a doctor, or get scalped by an Indian now that the full moon was on hand, or any of a dozen things. Not even a neighbor closer than seven miles.

Soon as Kate got a little easier, he got up and took the Navy Colt from its peg on the wall and brought it back to Kate.

"I'm going after the horse, Kate. I'm going to hike over to Yates' and get Mrs. Yates or one of the girls to come stay with you while I rustle a doctor. You might get blood poison or something. You need something to ease you, too. Fire the gun out the window if you need me before I find the horse."

He placed the pistol carefully under the edge of the mattress so she couldn't set it off accidentally.

He hurried out, got his bridle at the barn and went into the timber in a long-legged trot. He'd strike the spring branch just above the looping bend and there at this time of the day he'd most likely find the horses holed up in the willows and shallow water to avoid the heel flies. This winter he meant to split rails and fence a horse pasture for his saddle stock so they'd be handy for just such an emergency as this.

He should have one horse in the barn lot anyway, even if it did mean hauling corn for miles to feed it till he could raise a crop. Bill bit his lip. His brothers would rag him about this, but they'd rag him if he kept one horse up, too, and laugh at him for being afraid, and keeping a good horse fastened up so the Indians could get at him easy.

There was a little truth in the Indian business. Occasionally a few Indians from a main raiding party did come through here, but seldom now. Last year Yates had lost three good horses to them, and Thompson had lost a half-dozen.

Bill came to the branch and leaped it, his cowhide boots sinking into the mud on the bank. Then he went completely still, staring down at the mud. Beside his boot mark was the plain imprint of a moccasin, the water still oozing into it.

He ducked into a clump of box elders and squatted, heart racing. Why hadn't he brought his rifle? He lifted his head and listened, and down the branch about the loop, he heard his horses snorting, and brush popping. The damned Comanches were stealing them in broad open daylight.

And there wasn't a thing he could do about it. Here he lay with nothing to fight with but his hands and a bridle! Probably five or six of them, a splinter off of a main raiding party down from the Nations to steal horses. Best thing he could do was get back to the house and get ready in case they took a notion for some scalps. He could bar up the house and with the squirrel rifle, the shotgun and the Navy Colt he could give those thieving Indians something to think about.

And Kate was alone there, not even able

to bar a door in case some of them were prowling around the house while the others stole his horses. Panic seized Bill Bonner. If those thieving Indians were after Kate . . .

He was on his feet and running.

He leaped the branch and went up the slight bank in a rush, plunging headlong through a clump of berry vines.

As he cleared the vines, he came face to face with a big Comanche.

The buck's eyes popped in surprise, as did Bill Bonner's, then the Indian pulled in a breath for his warwhoop, and Bill Bonner slammed a fist into the buck's belly.

THAT took care of the warwhoop, but Bill Bonner didn't depend on it. He tore into the Indian with the panicked frenzy of the completely rattled. He pounded with his fists, kicked and cursed. Then he had his fingers wrapped around a red throat that already didnt' have any wind in it and was squeezing with all the strength hardened by months in the fields and on a ax and saw. He had to keep that Indian from warning the others, and he had to get back to Kate!

He had to get back to Kate, he had to get back!

Sanity slowly returned to Bill Bonner and with it came the knowledge that the Indian was perfectly still, had been for some time. Bill looked down into the purple, gaping face. He was choking a dead Indian. He had to make a second effort before he could reverse his squeezing and release his hold.

He stood up, then whirled as the sound of horses coming reached him from down the branch. The Comanches were coming with the horses. He started to run, then remembered the dead Indian and whirled back to grab a scalp lock and drag the body back into the vines. He lay flat himself as the horses came into sight. One of the raiders, riding Bill's favorite sorrel saddler, was leading four other horses and having trouble doing it. The horses didn't like the Indian smell.

The mounted Indian was armed only with a bow and arrow, the bow hooked over a shoulder. Still he could drop those lead ropes and get his primitive weapon in action quick enough if he sighted Bill Bonner and the dead Indian. And he would if he kept coming.

But the horses came to Bill's aid. Already spooked with Indian smell, and with more smell coming from the vines didn't help sooth them. They kept fighting the ropes and towing the entire bunch away from the branch. The Indian leading them had his hands full hanging onto them. Finally, though, he got them stopped with what, Bill was sure, was a lot of Indian cussing.

That Comanche chattered like a squirrel. And he kept it up as he quested the surrounding timber with darting eyes. He was signalling. There surely were more in the raiding party than him and the one Bill had killed, or they wouldn't have been so bold. Of course there were others.

Bill lay in the vines and cursed the thieving Indians to the fourth-generation. Probably at this minute the cabin was full of Comanches tearing up the place, stealing every thing they could lay hands on and maybe preparing right now to set the house afire with Kate in it. Bill Bonner gripped the earth with convulsive fingers. Of all the fool things he'd ever done, bringing Kate out here was the dumbest!

The Indian, towing the horses, moved on chattering like a squirrel. The moment he was out of sight, Bill was up and running—through the timber and brush like a scared swamp rabbit.

He didn't follow the meandering of the cow- and horse-trail but went straight, tearing through thicket of sprouts and leaping deadfalls or bulling through them if no way around them showed quickly. He was nearly winded when he sighted the cabin and paused in the timber to get back his breath. He had completely forgotten that any Indians at the house could have heard him coming for the last quarter-mile.

He came toward the house from behind

the barn, in a last spurt.

"Kate!" he yelled urgently. "Kate, Indians!"

Kate screamed, "Run, Bill, run!" Her warning was stopped by a blow and a wild cry from her.

Bill came head-on into a big buck as he tried to enter the cabin as the Indian tried to come out. Both went down, then four brawny bucks were onto Bill. A hatchet hit him a blow alongside the head and he lost interest, barely knew it when he was thrown headlong into the cabin.

AFTER seconds of scrabbling at the floor, Bill sat up and managed to focus his eyes. The first thing he saw was a big Indian with an arrow set to his bow string. The arrowhead was about three feet from Bill's nose. The other three raiders were in somewhat the same positions. Kate was in bed, but the bed had been moved until nearly against the stove in which there was a roaring fire.

Bill Bonner knew then why he hadn't been killed out of hand. He knew when he saw the little iron pot he used to melt lead for bullets on the stove, with lead already melting around the edges. Three rifles lay on the table. The Indians wanted balls for their rifles, and they'd set Kate to melting lead.

Rage blossomed in Bill Bonner as he saw Kate's white face and the way her eyes were sunken from pain. The Indians had not been gentle in moving the bed near the stove. And only two sticks were left in the woodbox. If she'd run out of wood they'd have beat her into getting more or killed her.

Bill Bonner was not thinking of his brothers in that moment; he thought only of his wife and knew than that only his strength and clear head would get them out of this awful predicament—or maybe get them killed a little quicker.

It was up to Bill Bonner.

A big Indian with a ferocious pattern painted on his face, grunted and made a violent motion at Kate, then at the stove. He wanted bullets and he wanted them now.

"Bullets. Quick!" He hefted his tomahawk.

Bill said, tapping his chest. "Make bullets. Me big bullet maker. Shoot good. Good!"

The Indian with the arrow set at Bill jumped forward. Bill felt the sting of the flint in his neck, felt warm blood run down his chest. The Indian grunted and jerked his arrow toward the stove.

Bill got to his feet and moved to the stove. They watched him suspiciously from glittery eyes. Bill tilted a stove lid to allow the iron pot more heat direct from the firebox. Taking the little iron spoon he used to pour lead, he poked at the lead with serious face.

It was heating rapidly now. Only a lump in the middle remained unmelted now. He said, "Move squaw out of way." He shoved Kate's bed back against the wall and heard a rasp of wood against wood as a bow was bent. Bill turned back to the stove and sleeved the sweat out of his eyes. One thing about it, if he ever got out of this, he'd never be scared of anything again!

He jogged up the fire, poked in the rest of the wood, and nodded with great satisfaction as he stirred the lead. He turned to the table and looked questioningly at the big buck. He pointed to a rifle bore and at the two bullet molds he owned. Inserting a finger experimently into the rifle he made a show of comparing the size of all the muzzles and a mold. He nodded. Four grunts answered him.

He poured a bullet, allowed it to set a little and with the mold not yet hot, the lead came loose quickly. Bill blew on it and handed it to the big buck. He pointed to the Indian's knife, then at the feather of lead where the jaws of the mold came together.

The Indian trimmed the feather off. Bill poured another bullet. They repeated the process. But the bullets were hotter now and so was the mold and the lead was thinly hot. The Indian grunted violently and dropped the bullet.

Bill said loudly, "Need water. Cool bullets." He dipped a gourd of water from

the bucket and set it on the table, poured more bullets, dropped them in the gourd, then gave them to the Indian.

They garbled among themselves a moment, then one went out and Bill heard him gobbling like a turkey. After the third gobble, an answering gobble came from toward the branch, faint and still distant. The buck came back into the cabin, talked some more, then fell to watching Bill again.

THAT answering gobble, as nearly as Bill could tell had come from toward the bend. That buck there was still hunting his partner. If he'd tied those horses, to look for tracks, Bill knew what he'd find.

And when he did he'd race for the cabin and the scalps of Bill and Kate Bonner would decorate some Comanche's lodge in Oklahoma Territory.

Bill retrieved his flop-brimmed hat from the floor and tugged it low over his eyes. He hoped that Kate wasn't in so much pain that she couldn't think straight. He was going to need her usual quickness right soon now, and he was going to need it real bad. If she just didn't panic beforehand and betray that Navy Colt! Twice he almost yelled as her hand stole down beside the bed, but each time she'd lifted the hand back empty.

Bill thought he heard a distant cry—his ears had been straining for it—and he did a lot of feet shuffling to cover the sound. Finally he heard the faintest sound of brush popping and knew the time had come. The dead man had been found, and Bill Bonner was not long for this world.

Using a rag and the iron spoon, he lifted the little pot of thinly bubbling lead off the stove and set it on the table. The brush-popping was plainer now and one Indian's head came up, listening.

Suddenly Bill shouted and pointed into the pot that was covered with green scum. At the shout the four Indians after the first start, scowled first at Bill, then at the lead in the pot at which he was pointing. They moved a little closer.

Bill Bonner dumped the gourd of water into the pot and ducked his head in the same motion, the flop brim of his hat covering his face. The lead exploded with a hissing crackle. On the heels of the sound came the howls of four Indians.

Bill grabbed the pot by the bail and swung it violently. It clunked with a sickening sound on top of a scalp lock and smashed the Indian to the floor. They were leaping and shouting. An arrow whipped past Bill as he threw the pot.

"Bill!" Kate screamed.

He darted a look and saw the Colt held high in her hand. She threw it and he grabbed it, got his finger in the guard and yanked back the hammer. He ducked as the big buck threw the tomahawk. The weapon slammed into the log wall near Bill's head as he shot the big Indian in the chest. The other two were lunging through the door. Bill fired too quickly, and missed. He leaped to the door as the Indian out there rushed around the barn.

Bill snapped a shot at him and he disappeared on the off side of the horse he was riding. Bill started to fire again, but held it. The Indians would know exactly how many bullets he had in it. He saw them disappear into the brush and timber, and turned back to charge his pistol.

With his gun loaded again, he began barring doors and windows just in case the Comanches came back.

Kate was lying quietly, watching him with soft eyes. He grinned at her and her smile was strong and sure.

"Kate," Bill Bonner said, "you know what I'm going to have to do?"

"What, Bill?"

"I'm going to whip a couple of my big, bossy brothers! They've had it coming for a long time. I never could do it before because, deep down, I didn't think I could. I know now that I can."

Kate said softly, "I know you can, Bill." She smiled at him. "And you know what, Bill? They'll be tickled about it."

Bill Bonner felt good all over and he took the grins until Kate had to laugh. "You're a tall man now, Bill Bonner!"

"Yeah!" he said, grinning widely.

A novelet by **PHILIP MORGAN**

Too Many

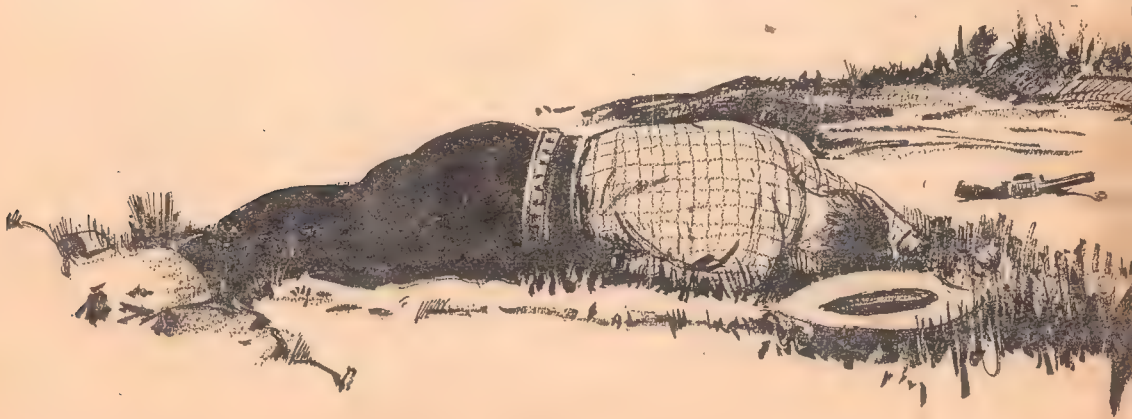
No traitor to the brand, young Dan Thompson just couldn't stomach the new gun crew—nor fight against the girl he loved

CHAPTER I

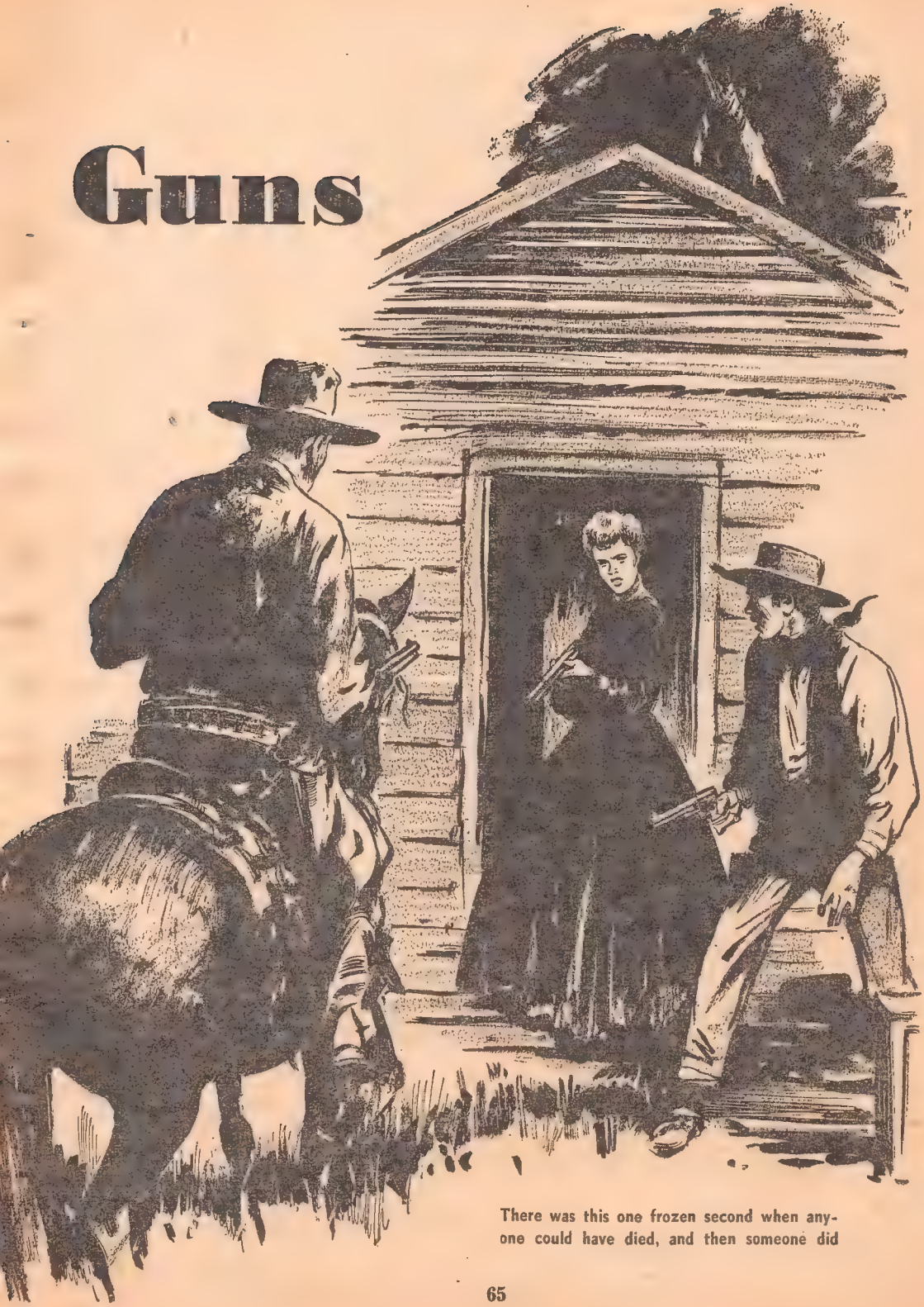
Ultimatum

WHEN young Dan Thompson came down to the corral for his horse that morning, the stranger was there, lounging against the poles, smoking a cigarette. As Dan approached, he saw that the man was tall and lean and that even standing relaxed, muscles stood out through the shirt that clung tightly to his back.

A vague sense of foreboding touched Dan and he felt a coldness in his belly. Walking quietly, he was ten paces in back of the stranger before the man sensed his presence. The moment the stranger did he swung about and moved a step sideward, his hand dropping fast for the gun that rode low on his right hip. That gun was thonged down. The man's yellow eyes were sprung wide and his face reminded Dan of the way a hawk looks as it makes a swoop on an



Guns



There was this one frozen second when anyone could have died, and then someone did

unsuspecting jackrabbit.

Seeing that Dan meant no trouble, the stranger dropped his hand from the gun and smiled. But the smile did not erase the memory of his expression in that one frozen moment.

"You shouldn't never walk up behind a man like that," the stranger said softly. He was smiling, that false smile. Again Dan felt a coldness again in the pit of his stomach. There was something about the man, something inhuman.

"Are you working here?" Dan asked sharply.

The stranger nodded. "Started this morning."

"Who hired you?"

"Old Man Thompson, the boss."

Dan, turning, walked swiftly across the yard to the house and entered. He went down the hall to the room his father, Pres Thompson, used as an office. Pres was there, bent over his desk, working at some figures with a stub of a pencil. He looked up in annoyance as Dan came in.

"I'm busy right now, Dan. See me later."

"Who's the new hand?" Dan asked flatly. "Since when do we hire a man just to use a gun?"

"What makes you think he was hired just to use a gun?" Pres Thompson said warily.

HE SAT back in his chair now, a short man, but tremendous through the chest and shoulders, and with a thick neck that pulled his head down into those shoulders. His face was square, and all the features large. Only in the last few years had that face showed any sign of sagging. Pres Thompson was sixty-two years old, but he still thought of himself as the iron-hard man he had been twenty years before.

Dan sat down and looked at his father closely. He said, "Times change, Dad. The old days are over, and we have to change our ways. I haven't said anything about all the new hands you've been hiring, because at least they work the range, even if they are tough. But this new one has gunfighter written all over him. I can't go along with that."

Pres Thompson's face began to color and his blue eyes got that cold look Dan had seen only too often. The look that meant trouble.

"So now you're trying to tell me how to run T Cross!" Pres exploded. "So now I'll tell you something. I made this ranch and I held it together through tougher times than this. When I found a man in my way, I cut him down. When they rustled my cattle, I ran them down and hung them. I made them leave me alone because they were afraid of me. And I always figured you'd do the same. I raised you right, but somewhere along the line you got soft."

"It wasn't from the way I was raised," Dan said softly. "You made me work like any of the hands from the time I was sixteen and I don't remember you saying a kind word to me in my life."

"A man has to be hard, and I tried to make you hard. You're a good hand with cattle, but when it comes to taking care of trouble you fall down complete. You're like your mother. You can always see some reason for not fighting. Well, they're taking my range and I'm not young enough to do the fighting myself and you won't. That means I've got to hire someone to do the fighting for me. And if you don't like it, you can pack your warbag and get out."

Dan sat there a moment longer, then came to his feet, his jaw settling into a stubborn line. In that moment he looked very much like his father.

"You've done all the talking, all my life," he announced flatly. "And I've listened and done what you said, because you are my father. I've done things I was ashamed of for you because of that. But you don't give a tinker's dam for me or anyone else. You've got thousands of acres fenced and you don't run cattle on half of it, but it belongs to you, because you happened in here before anyone else could settle. Now you're fixing to kill a few more people to keep everything just the way it's always been."

Pres Thompson started up out of the chair, anger suffusing his always florid face with a deeper color. "Nobody talks to me like that!"

Dan reached out and shoved him roughly back. "You'll hear me out. I've taken it for twenty-two years, but I've had enough. You've got five families down along the west line, nice people who mean you no harm. But because they didnt' jump when you said to get off, you hire a paid killer to scare them off. Maybe I've known what you were like all along and didn't want to admit it even to myself. But I don't plan on being a party to any slaughter. I'm leaving. And if you're smart, you'll send that gunman packing and forget about fighting those people. You'll lose everything if you don't." He wheeled about and walked rapidly from the room.

He was half-way down the hall to the outside door when his father's enraged voice reached him.

"Come back here! That's an order!"

Habit was strong in Dan. He almost pulled up, but remembered in time, and kept on going.

THE stranger was still at the corral, just idling away the time. This time he saw Dan coming and the same humorless smile turned his thin lips. He stepped forward and put out his right hand, "Sorry about being so hard before. You must be the Old Man's kid. I'm Wes Clarke from Ogallala."

Dan ignored the man's hand. He faced him squarely and said, "The people my father is sending you after are legally on the land. You gun anyone and the U.S. Marshal will be right on your tail."

"Well, now that just scares me to death," Clarke said. "Whose side are you on anyhow, kid? Seems like you ought to side with your pa."

"Not when he's wrong. Not when what he's doing will ruin him."

"Well, just one thing, kid—don't ever get in my way. I don't like people who get in my way."

There was something about this Wes Clarke that put a chill in a man. But Dan looked the gunman squarely in the face and said quietly, "Don't try giving me orders, Clarke. And don't ever get the idea I'm one of those farmers who have never held a gun. I don't make my living with one, but I know how to use it."

For a moment there was a bright dangerous glitter in Clarke's eyes. Then it died and he laughed easily. "Feeling your oats today, ain't you? Well, no call for you and me arguing." He leaned back against the corral pole.

Dan waited another moment, then moved by the man, climbed into the corral and roped out his sorrel gelding. He saddled and swung up and the gunman opened the gate for him, still smiling. As Dan rode away, Clarke was again leaning against the corral fence, as relaxed as a rattlesnake sunning on a rock.

Dan rode straight west across the rolling land that was like all of the Cross T range. Western Nebraska land, short grass with a lot of nourishment in it. It was the best cattle graze to be found anywhere. A land of swelling hills and sudden cuts and draws and occasional deep canyons to which stunted pine clung stubbornly. As he rode, Dan thought deeply about the move he had made and realized that it had been building up in him for a long time. His father had never had time for him, had never shown him any affection, so consequently he had no real feeling of regret for his parent.

Yet now he felt a deep regret—not because he had left, but because it had been necessary for him to leave. All his life he had believed that some day his father would wake up and realize that he had a son. That hope was dead now. And he saw his father for what he was—an unyielding, arrogant old man. A man who would kill to hold land he didn't need. It sickened him. Now he was free. He didn't know what he was going to do, but at last he had made a move.

Twenty miles west of the Cross T home quarters, Dan crested a small hill and started down a long slope that led to a creek. Along this creek at mile intervals

were the five nester families Pres Thompson was getting ready to run off.

Each family had filed on a section of land that formerly had been open range, and which Pres Thompson had used for many years. But they were there legally and anyone running them off was asking for trouble. But that wouldn't stop Pres Thompson and it wouldn't stop Wes Clarke. As Dan thought about it, he didn't think it would worry any of the tough crew his father had gradually assembled in the last two years.

CHAPTER II

"You Love Me"

AT THE first place Dan Thompson rode into the yard, pulled up a hundred feet from the cabin, and called ahead with usual rangeland courtesy, "Hello!" He felt a small quickening of his pulse as he waited. For Mary Parker and her brother Bill lived here. Dan had met them and had eaten a few meals with them. Once he had brought them a quarter of beef in return for the meals. And he had come to think that Mary liked him. She was a quiet girl, pretty and quick, with a nice laugh that he had found he liked very much to hear. She came out of the cabin now and smiled when she saw who it was. He rode forward and dropped from his horse.

"Where have you been, stranger?" she asked him. "It's been almost a month."

Pleased that she had missed him he returned her smile. "I've been over east with a crew fixing fence," he said, then remembered his mission here, and stopped smiling. "Where's Bill?"

"He's over at the Andersons helping fix their barn." She sensed something wrong and said, "What is it, Dan? What's wrong?"

"It's Dad. He's decided to run you all off this land."

She shrugged. "He's tried it once. Told us we better move on or there'd be trouble. Bill told him to get out and stay out. He hasn't been back."

"This time he means business. He's hired a gunman named Clarke to see to it that you do move." He saw the shock of his words and wished he hadn't made it quite so plain.

But Mary recovered quickly and said, "It's our land. He can't run us off."

Dan said, "If he can't, he'll kill you. I know him. When he wants something, he gets it. Mary, you've got to move. The land isn't worth dying for."

"What about you? Can you stand by and let him kill innocent people, Dan? What kind of a man are you?"

"He's my father. I can't fight him. I left home this morning and I'm not going back."

Her brown eyes went a shade darker. "And that takes care of everything. Now you'll run off somewhere and no one can blame you. Is that it?"

He said pleadingly, "Mary, the creek's our west line. Move over on the other side and he'll leave you alone. This land isn't worth a killing, and that's what it's come to."

Her eyes were blazing now. "This is our land! Who is *he* that he can order us off any time he feels like it? And what kind of a man are you to let him? You're a coward, Dan Thompson! Get off our land and don't come back—ever!"

Her breasts rose and fell with her rapid breathing and a real beauty blazed in her face at that moment. But it was the second time that day someone had called Dan yellow and anger boiled through him. He took two steps forward, caught her to him and held her struggling against him. She tried to free her arms to strike him, she tried to hit him, but he held her easily.

"What do you think this is between us?" he demanded. "A thing you can turn on and off like a light? I'm in love with you and you're in love with me. Don't forget it." He tipped her chin back and kissed her roughly, holdng her full aganst him. She tried to turn her head aside at first and her lips were stiff and unresponsive.

But he held the kiss until she stopped struggling, until her lips softened and met his eagerly. When finally he released her and stepped back she looked at him with the same savage wanting in her face that he felt himself. She was trembling. He turned to his horse and mounted at once, not sure of what would happen if he stayed.

"I hate you!" she said. "I hate you for making me love you."

HE WAS watching her with unsmiling attention. "Maybe it will work out. I can't believe he will go through with it. Maybe it's a bluff. But you should move across the river. You have no chance against him."

She said, "We have our pride, Dan. But you should make him stop. You're his son."

He told her then what he had never told anyone before. "He thinks no more of me than he does of anyone else. If I got in his way, I think he would probably try to kill me. But I can't fight him. I'm not afraid of him, but it isn't in me to lift a gun against him. If that's being yellow, then I'm yellow."

She shook her head. "I don't know; I don't know anything. All I know is that I'm terribly frightened for Bill and the others. They won't run, and I think you should stop your father. But if you don't and if you come back for me, I'll go with you. I'll hate myself, but I'll go."

"I'll be back," he said and rode from the yard, heading for the Andersons with his grim message. His thoughts were in turmoil, and his wanting for the girl still made a tightness in his belly. He thought of Wes Clarke coming to the Parkers and finding her there alone and the thought filled him with a savage anger. If they ever touched that girl, he would kill them, Clarke and his father both.

All of the homesteaders were at the Andersons. They were all young men and all of them except Bill Parker had families. There was Joe Kilman, tall and soft-spoken and Southern. Kilman was a farmer solely and he wouldn't last in this land, which required both farming and cattle raising for a man to make a living. Then there were John and Henry Schmidt, solidly built men of thirty, brothers who had filed on adjoining quarters. None of these men were fighters, or rebels, and Dan thought a good scare would move them across the creek.

But it would not be that way with either Bill Parker or Swede Anderson. They would not scare. They were about the same age, twenty-five, both tall, well-built young men. Anderson was fair and Bill was dark, but they could have been brothers in appearance outside of that. And both possessed an iron pride and an iron courage. All of these men stopped work and watched Dan ride up, with mingled emotions in their faces.

Dan drew rein in front of them and threw one leg over the horn. "I quit the Cross T this morning," he announced without preliminary. "I figured I better come and tell you that Pres has hired a gunman out of Ogallala and he's getting ready either to run you out or blow you out."

He saw shock hit all of these men, and saw the quick fear that brushed across the faces of Kilman and the Schmidts. The same shock was evident in the lean faces of the two younger men, but anger swiftly rubbed it out. He saw that anger with a real regret.

"I'm not much in the habit of tucking my tail under and running every time some hog wants to get his feet in the trough," Swede Anderson said harshly.

"Just move across the creek," Dan urged, "and he'll let you alone. He's never claimed that land." But he knew his words were futile. "He doesn't hate nesters. It's just that he figures this land is rightfully his and that you people are taking it from him."

"Why are you telling us this?" Bill Parker asked suddenly. They had always got along well, but now there was something close to hate in Bill's eyes.

"I told you I quit! It was because of this. I kill my own snakes. I never hire somebody to fight for me. And I think

you people have a right to this land. But it's his ranch."

PARKER said hotly, "What you mean to say is you quit because you're too yellow to stand up on your hind legs like a man and make him do what's right! Hell, you're as bad as he is!"

It was the third time in one morning that someone had called Dan Thompson yellow. It was more than any man could take. Dan carefully wrapped the reins around the horn, unbuckled his gun-belt, took it off and hung it on the horn and placed his hat on top of it. Swinging down, he walked in close to Bill Parker and slapped him solidly across the mouth.

Parker staggered back. His hand went up to his mouth and wiped at his lips. He caught his balance and stood a moment, surprised and off-guard. Then he grinned and said, "Well, now, that was a mistake, friend Thompson. I'll break your back."

"You do a lot of talking," Dan said easily. "I don't think you can back it up."

Parker said nothing more. He moved in fast and swung a hard left. Dan caught it on his raised arm, but Parker's right came around and caught him on the side of the head and the world was suddenly gray. He ducked and grabbed Parker by the waist and held on while they went bucking and lunging around the yard. When his head cleared he jumped free, bored in and hit Parker with a solid right and left to the head. He did it coldly, not hating, just wanting to set it straight about him being yellow. Bill Parker took the blows and was groggy for a moment and in that moment, Dan moved in again and hit him hard in the solar plexus. When Bill's head came down, Dan sledged a blow to the man's neck. Bill went to his knees and stayed there a moment, shaking his head doggedly side to side to clear it. When he came up again, the grin was gone from his face.

"Stay down," Dan said, and wished he would.

But Bill made it to his feet and came in at Dan, swaying and uncertain on his feet, but refusing to quit. Dan measured him, stepped in quickly and swung a roundhouse right that hit Parked flush on the jaw with the clean sound of an axe hitting wood. Parker fell forward on his face and did not move. Dan turned to his horse and swung aboard. He sat looking down at the nesters for a moment, then said;

"If you're smart, you'll move across the creek."

"It's our land," Swede Anderson said angrily. "We're staying.

"It won't be much use to a dead man," Dan remarked wryly and rode from the yard.

He headed for town, feeling let-down and miserable. When his father moved against the nesters, his chances with Mary Parker would go glimmering. It hurt to think of it, but he didn't see what he could do to stop it.

CHAPTER III

First Blood

THAT evening, Pres Thompson called the crew together and introduced them to Wes Clark. He didn't need to tell them what Clarke's job was. It was written all over the man. Even in this tough crew, he stood out.

Thompson spoke to them briefly. "You all know we have five nesters squatting on Cross T range. I propose to move them off. I hope we can do it without trouble, but I intend to move them one way or another. If any of you are squeamish about it, get your time." No one spoke, and he nodded in satisfaction. "All right, get your horses. We're going calling." The crew turned away at once, all except Wes Clarke, who lingered until the others were out of earshot.

"You figured just how far you're going with this, Thompson?"

"We'll move them, that's all. But you keep out of it unless a fight starts. I don't want anyone shot unless they start the shooting. You got that?"

Clarke nodded, but the brightness was back in his yellow eyes. As he moved away to get his horse, he was smiling. It was not a pretty smile.

They rode north and came in on Swede Anderson's place first. They rode at a walk and were in the yard before he heard them. He was in the barn, just finishing his chores. When he heard the horses, he came running out, to find himself surrounded by the horsemen. He stopped and set the milk pail on the ground and stood before them without showing fear.

He singled out Pres Thompson and said bitterly, "Your kid told us you was coming, but we didn't think you'd get around this soon."

Thompson spoke heavily, his very tone of voice a command. "I told you to get off this land when you first came here. Now I'm moving you off."

"I'm on Government land," Swede said. "I intend to stay here. You've got no call to move me off."

"It was my land before the Government even knew it was here," Thompson said.

Wes Clarke had moved his horse up until he now sat beside Thompson. Anderson's wife suddenly began calling his name in a frightened voice, all of it making for a tighter and tighter situation. Anderson stood firmly planted in the dust, his hand resting easily on the butt of his gun. There was in him a stolid acceptance of this situation. He had made a bad blunder and he knew how this was going to end. He did not intend to give them the satisfaction of showing any fear.

"You running back where you come from, farmer?" Wes Clarke asked softly.

"I'm staying," Anderson said.

He never saw Wes Clarke's hand fall and rise with his gun. He never heard the shot that killed him. He felt a tearing pain in his chest, then blackness rushed in and he knew no more.

Anderson's wife rushed from the cabin, crying out at them. Pres Thompson cursed Wes Clarke, then the whole crew had wheeled and was racing away, Thompson with them. They rode for two miles before they slowed down and finally stopped. Then Thompson turned on Wes Clarke, his voice lashing at the man.

"What the hell was the sense in that? You killed him just for the fun of it!"

Clarke smiled coldly. "It had to be done. It'll throw a scare into all the rest of 'em. By tomorrow night there won't be a one of them on your land. That's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"I told you no shooting unless they started it. We could have dropped a rope on the man and burned him out. Instead you killed him. Now the whole country'll be on our necks!"

CLARKE said coldly, "Stop crying. You make me sick. You knew how it was going to be when you hired me. Now you start bawling at the first bit of trouble. Well, make up your mind to it. If you want that land, you have to pay for it. If you want to sit home and let me do the dirty work, all right. But if you come along, don't bellyache."

Pres Thompson's face got red and his hand fell to the butt of his gun. But there was truth in what the gunman said and he had to admit it.

He said tightly, "All right, Clarke, you said it. This time you get away with it. But don't ever try talking that way to me again. I'm getting old and I'm not as fast as I once was. But I'm not scared of you, or anybody else, and if you ever shoot mouth off again, one of us is going to die."

Clarke's eyes narrowed in surprise. He had thought Old Man Thompson was weak, and this sudden display of strength came as a shock. But he recognized courage when he saw it, he knew Thompson meant what he said. He nodded.

"I didn't mean to get so riled. All I was trying to say was that there is no easy way to get this thing done."

Thompson said musingly, "If they're all like that last one, we might not get it done at all. We won't surprise them from now on."

Clarke laughed nastily. "Don't worry about it. They'll all run now."

"I doubt it," the rancher said and

turned his horse, heading for home.

He thought of Dan then and had a bad moment. This would turn his son irrevocably against him. But he shrugged off the thought. The boy just didn't understand. . . .

When Dan Thompson came onto the porch of the hotel in Antelope the next morning after breakfast, he was without any clear idea of what he was going to do next. The Cross T had been his life and he had thought it always would be. Now he had to find something else to do. He thought of Mary Parker, and hated to leave the country. Yet there wasn't much else he could do. He didn't want to stay here where he would run into his father even occasionally. It would be too easy to let Pres talk him into coming back. He leaned against a porch support, idly smoking and idly considering his next move.

At that moment, he heard the wooden bridge over the creek west of town give out its booming echoes. Looking that way he saw the big procession coming into town and knew at once with a dread chill what it meant. He watched them come down the street—all of the nesters and their families. Mary Parker rode horseback and her brother drove the Anderson's rig. Mrs. Anderson rode with him, her face drawn with grief. In the back of the rig, a tarp covered Swede Anderson's long form. The nesters pulled in before Sheriff Clayton Benson's office and halted. The sheriff came out at once, wearing the stern expression he reserved for big occasions. But Dan could detect the uneasiness in Benson's motions. The sheriff was a Cross T man.

"The Cross T hit the Andersons last night," Bill Parker said quietly. "They shot down Swede without giving him a chance. His gun was still in his holster. What are you going to do about it, Benson?"

The sheriff reached up and pulled at his mustache gravely. He said in a sonorous voice, "How many of you witnessed this killing? Who did the shooting?"

"Nobody saw it," Mary Parker snapped. "It was dark. But Lila heard Swede call Pres Thompson's name. That's enough for an arrest."

"Not hardly," Benson said smoothly. "Now, you folks are all het up. After the funeral is time enough to talk about such things. If the Cross T did this, we'll find out and we'll arrest the man that did the shooting."

DAN THOMPSON saw the defeat that hit all of these people, but he saw Bill Parker shake it off.

"I told you how it would be," Bill said. "He's Thompson's man. We'll have to kill our own snakes."

"Now wait a minute," Benson protested.

"Don't get yourself in a hole, Sheriff," Parker cut him off, his voice tight and deadly. "Just don't."

Benson stared at the young nester a minute and the bluster faded out of him. A faint fear crowded into his florid face. He turned and went back into the office.

Dan saw it all with a sickness spreading through him, a sickness at the thought of the dead Anderson and of his failure to stop the killing. And a sickness that his father had done this.

Dan hadn't taken his eyes off Mary Parker and she suddenly seemed to sense that someone was watching her, because she swung in the saddle and looked across the street at him. When she saw who it was, she swung around again at once, giving no indication that she had seen him. He didn't blame her, knowing how she must feel, but it hurt just the same.

The bridge again sent out its booming, and Dan turned to look. He saw the Cross T coming into town. His father rode in the lead with Wes Clarke beside him. They came straight on to where the nesters waited and reined in. Pres Thompson's expression was noncommittal, but the gunman beside him was coldly smiling. Dan saw the fear that hit all of the nesters and a cold rage came alive in him, rage that had been building since he had first seen Swede Anderson's lifeless body in the back of the wagon. He stood erect and waited.

Pres Thompson leaned from his saddle

and looked down at the dead man. The rancher's face was blank and even Dan could not tell what his father was feeling. He looked around the circle of faces, all of them hating him. He gravely reached up and took off his hat, holding it in his left hand.

"What happened here?"

Bill Parker jumped down from the wagon and faced the Cross T, standing tall and unafraid before them. But he was vulnerable. Anger had weakened his judgment and he was in plain danger of falling into a trap. If the Cross T could provoke him to draw, then the last rebel would be gone. Dan knew that was why Cross T was here. He stepped clear of the porch support, unnoticed. But he had the Cross T flanked.

Bill Parker's hard voice was saying, "You've got a lot of gall, Thompson, showing up here today. You killed him. You ought at least to let him be buried in peace."

Thompson was unmoved. He said quietly, "Sonny, you're talkin' like a fool." Wes Clarke's smile got wider and still wider.

Mary Parker called warningly, "Don't let them force you into a fight, Bill. It's what they want."

"You dirty murderers and your hired lawman!" Parker shouted. "You think you own the whole world. Well, you don't own my land and you never will. I don't know about the rest of the folks, but I'm staying right where I am."

"That's pretty rough talk, Parker," Wes Clarke said coldly. "You figure you can back it up?"

Silence fell then; complete and deadly silence. The challenge was there and Bill Parker could not refuse. If he backed down now, he would be labelled a coward, even though the odds were so badly stacked against him. It was what Dan had feared would happen. In his anger, Bill had backed into a corner from which there was only one way out. Lifting his gun from holster, Dan sighted on Wes Clarke and pulled the hammer back to full cock.

THE sound of that cocking hammer was loud in the street's silence. It brought Wes Clarke's head swiveling around, his yellow eyes bright with sudden fear. Clarke was looking right down Dan's gun-barrel. The gunman sat perfectly still.

Dan said, "Just open the ball any time at all, Bill. The hired rattlesnake is out of it."

Pres Thompson hit out at Dan with his big voice, "Have you gone crazy? Put up that gun!"

"Take your crew down the street, Dad. When you're needing twenty men to side you in a fight, then its time I took a hand."

"I don't need your advice," Thompson said.

"In five seconds, I intend to fire," Dan said. "There was no doubting that he meant it.

Wes Clarke cried, "Do like he says!"

Pres waited another moment, then abruptly wheeled his mount and went back down the street. The crowd followed him, but Clarke sat where he was, his face gone chalk-white. For in that brief space of time, he did not know whether he was going to die or not.

Dan finally said, "All right, Clarke, reach down with your left hand and unbuckle your belt." Clarke obeyed and the gun and belt fell heavily to the street. Bill Parker took the gun and stepped back, his expression plainly puzzled.

Sheriff Benson came from the office again. "What's going on here, Dan?" he asked angrily.

"There's your killer, Sheriff. Lock him up and hold him for trial."

CHAPTER IV

No Killer Instinct

BENSON'S face was a study in confusion. A politician, he was afraid of the reaction this would have with Pres

Thompson. But he was also used to avoiding trouble whenever possible, so chose to avoid the immediate problem and do as he was ordered.

He pulled his gun and waved it at Wes Clarke, making a big thing of it. "Get down from there, mister."

Clarke climbed from saddle and moved willingly enough to the sheriff's door. There he turned and looked across the street at Dan Thompson, who had now holstered his gun.

"I'll be seeing you about this," he called.

"Don't ever set foot on any land of mine," Dan said evenly. "I'll kill you if you do. And I'll give you just as much of a chance as you gave Anderson."

Clarke cursed and went quickly through the door of the sheriff's office.

All of the nesters waited uncertainly. Finally Bill Parker said to Dan, "Maybe I was wrong about you." He climbed back to the seat of the wagon, clucked to the team and all of them except Mary went on to Stewart's Funeral Parlor. Mary rode across the street and stopped in front of Dan, her eyes worried.

"That gunman meant what he said, Dan," she said quickly. "He'll try to kill you."

"I don't think so. He works for money and there wouldn't be any money in having trouble with me. He'll cool off."

"Will Sheriff Benson hold him for the Court?"

"No, but he'll probably hold him long enough for you to bury Anderson and get out of town. What are you going to do then? You better be thinking about that, because it won't end here. They've gone this far, so now they'll have to finish it."

She shrugged helplessly. "Bill will stay on the land. There's nothing I can do about it." She paused and looked at him closely. "What are *you* going to do?"

"I don't quite know yet. I have an idea, but it might fall through. But I won't be far away. I'll never be far from you."

Mary accepted that with a small tired smile. She lifted her hand briefly to her lips, then turned the horse and went on to Stewart's. He watched her until she disappeared inside the building.

Leaving the hotel, Dan strolled down to the Belle Saloon. All of the Cross T ponies were tied at the rack and from inside came an angry murmur of voices. The Cross T had ruled this country for a long time and today had been the first time they had ever been made to back down. That stung everyone from the cook to the foreman. Dan pushed through the doors and found the crew lined against the bar. Someone saw him and poked the next man in the ribs. Then they were all covertly watching him. He paid no attention to them.

Pres Thompson sat alone at a table and it was on Pres that Dan placed his entire attention. Pres had seen him come in, but gave no sign. Dan walked up to the table and stopped, waiting for his father to look up.

When Pres finally acknowledged his presence, he did it with a short jerk of his head. "Sit down. I'm not mad at you. I know you was just putting on a show for the girl."

Dan was honestly startled. His father really believed that. But then he realized that he shouldn't have been surprised. Pres had had his way all his life and his belief in his own power was absolute. It was absolute to the point that he believed any means was right to hold that power. Even murder. In that moment, Dan felt sorry for him.

"You always told me you were a man who paid his debts," he said. "Does that still go?"

"I've never welshed yet," Pres said coldly. "What's eating you?"

"I've worked for you for eight years and I've never drawn any wages. That makes a sizable amount you owe me. Is that right?"

PRES was obviously puzzled. "Just figure what it is and I'll pay it."

"I don't want money. I need a hundred head of good stock to get started with. I want you to give them to me."

Pres thought about that for a moment. It was written all over his face that he wanted to tell Dan to go to the devil. But there were several townsmen in the saloon and his pride would not let him.

"All right, ride out and take your pick."

"I'll need a bill of sale." Pres got a pencil and a piece of paper from the bartender, wrote out the bill of sale, and handed it to Dan.

"Thanks," Dan said briefly and started to leave.

"Wait a minute," Pres called. "You're my son. I want you back on the place."

"I'm through, Pres. What you did last night cut it once and for all. I got a good look at you today out there in the street and I didn't like what I saw."

"You just don't savvy!" Pres replied angrily. "You never have. You've got to be hard. In this world it's the strong who survive. Maybe some day you'll learn that. When you do, come home. But meanwhile, watch out for Wes Clarke. He'll hate your guts for what you did today."

"I'll watch out, but maybe he better be a little careful, too. You taught me to shoot when I was eight years old and you taught me all the tricks of the trade. You always told me that in your day you were as fast as any of them. You've said I'm as fast as you ever were."

"But you don't have the killer instinct, boy. You'd be wondering whether you ought to kill him or not. Wondering would kill you."

"Maybe before," Dan said quietly. "But not after this morning. If I ever see Wes Clarke, I'll kill him. You're my father and maybe I should have stayed and kept you from riding out last night. Maybe I should have stopped you even if I had to shoot you. But I didn't, so part of the blame for Swede Anderson's murder rubs off on me. I can't shoot you for it, but I can shoot Clarke. If he's smart, he'll get out of this country. And if you're smart you'll forget about any more trouble."

With that, Dan Thompson walked swiftly from the saloon, leaving Pres Thompson with a stunned expression on his heavy face.

All of the nesters were at Stewart's. Dan went down there and called Mrs. Anderson outside. She had been pretty, but she was not pretty now. Her eyes were heavy with grief and there were deep lines in her face that had not been there before—a woman who had grown old in the space of a few hours. There was desolation in her now in every line of her tired body.

"Ma'am," Dan told her, "I have a hundred head of beef. I want your permission to move them onto your place. You can come back there to live. I'll see to it that you aren't bothered. When the time is up, you can get your patent and own the land."

She looked up at him, curiosity faintly stirring in her eyes. "Why should you do this for me?"

"I want to," he said simply.

She studied him silently and finally said, "All right. I have no place else to go."

He raised his hat to her and walked away up the street and after awhile, she want back inside.

Dan rode out of town after buying a few supplies. He went directly to the west range of the Cross T, rounded up a hundred head of cows and calves and drove them to the section on which the Andersons had filed. He left the herd there, knowing the cattle would stay, since the pasture was good and water was near. He put his horse up in the barn, then went to the house and cooked supper and ate with a good appetite. After supper, he sat on a bench outside the house, listening to the muted song of the creek.

IT WAS a still night and he felt strangely at peace. Trouble was coming to him, but it didn't seem quite as important as it had earlier. He was trying to set something right with what he was doing for Mrs. Anderson. He was paying a part of the family's debt to her, part of the Cross T's debt. It could never be fully paid, because her husband was dead, but it was better than doing nothing. If he lived, Mrs. Anderson was going to keep

this land she and Swede had filed on and had worked so hard to improve.

Sitting there Mary Parker's image came before Dan, warm and alive and vibrant. He hadn't realized until this morning when he had thought she was lost to him just how much he needed her. That need colored his whole life. He wanted to take her and leave the country, but the Cross T owed a debt and it was a debt only he could pay. His father had gone too far down the path of arrogance and pride and power to even know or care.

It was up to him to stop his father. He wasn't sure yet how he was going to do it, but moving onto this land was the first step. His love for the girl could not overrule his plain duty. Somehow, he knew that Mary would understand. She had been raised in a raw land and she knew that tough decisions came to a man. A man could not run and she would know that, too. Still thinking warmly of her he went to the barn, rolled up in his blanket and went to sleep.

The following morning, Dan saddled up and made a swing around the Anderson section, noting how the cattle showed no inclination to leave. Anderson had broken only about forty acres and the rest was the best grassland he had seen. It was undoubtedly sub-irrigated by the water from the creek. This was a section from which one person could make a good living, and he recognized that some day soon this whole bottom land would be in farms. But there was plenty of land back in the hills where no crop could survive and was fit only for running cattle. And with the many small lakes and pot-holes to be found, there was no need to worry about the water supply.

At ten o'clock, he came over a small rise and saw a rider coming from the direction of the Cross T. The rider saw the cattle and came on to examine them. Having seen them, he wheeled his horse and rode back in the direction of the Cross T at a gallop. So the news would now reach Pres Thompson and he would know that his son was standing against him. It was just as well.

At eleven, when he saw a lone rider approaching from town he rode to the house, stabled his horse, and then returned to the yard to wait. For a moment there was an empty feeling in his stomach at the thought that this might be Wes Clarke coming to kill him, but he put down the momentary panic. He was a grown man, and had done what he had done with the full knowledge of the possible consequences. He refused to worry about it.

The rider finally appeared over the last rise and came on at a brisk trot. It was Mary Parker. Smiling, he walked slowly forward to meet her. When she reined up she sat a moment, seriously regarding him. Then she came from the saddle, went right to him and kissed him. He felt the hunger in her kiss, a hunger to match his own. She strained against him and her arms held him with hard strength. It was a long time before she pulled back. He tried to kiss her again, but she turned her head aside and covered his lips with her fingers. "I don't think we better, Dan." Her voice was shaken. He stepped back from her, smiling faintly.

"It's a good thing you can keep your head."

She smiled also, a tight, strained smile. "I don't think I can, so we better not put it to the test often."

"When this is over," he said, "I'm going to drag you off to the nearest preacher."

"Yes, Dan," she replied. "I hope it's soon."

AS THEY sat down on the bench outside the house she turned to him, her face troubled.

"I don't like it, Dan. I know why you did it and it was right. But I thought about it all night and I don't want to be the cause of trouble between you and your father. And I did tell you that you should have stopped him."

He shrugged, "You and Bill were right. If I had stopped him, Swede Anderson would be alive. But he's dead and now I'm going to see to it that his wife has a place to live."

"What will happen?" she asked worriedly. "Knowing you're here, your father won't go ahead, will he?"

"I don't know. He might. This land has always meant more to him than anything else. He ignored my mother all her life and he never had any time for me. He'll consider me a traitor and he'll think he can scare me off. He thinks I'm weak, because I don't see things the way he does. He can't understand that I feel just as strong about what I believe as he does about what he believes."

"I hope he comes to his senses," she said. "I hope it with all my heart."

"What about Mrs. Anderson?"

"Bill is bringing her out. I rode on ahead, but they should be here soon. She says she will stay on the land. You gave her hope."

"I don't know," he said. "I hope it will work. I hope they don't burn the place down over her head. But if we can hold it for her, it will take care of her. It's good land." He got up and paced restlessly to the corner of the cabin and looked down the road to town. He could see a wagon, maybe a mile off. "They're coming."

Mary said quickly, "Come here and kiss me before they get here." He did as he was told, then they moved out into the yard and were waiting there when the wagon rolled up.

Bill Parker glanced at his sister's face and smiled. "When do you intend to make an honest woman of her, Dan?"

"As soon as she'll have me," Dan said. He moved up to the wagon and gave Mrs. Anderson a hand. She was pale, and sorrow was a black shadow in her eyes, yet she managed a grateful smile for him.

"I think I'll go inside and lie down for awhile," she said. "You will take your meals here, Mr. Thompson."

"That's not necessary. I can cook my own outside. I'll only be here as long as I think there's a chance of trouble."

She shook her head, determined, her lips set in a straight line. "No, you'll eat in the house. It's the least I can do. I have a lot of years to be without my husband. I might just as well start getting used to it." She went on to the house and passed inside.

"It's been terrible for her," Mary murmured. "They were devoted to each other."

Bill Parker spoke briefly to Dan. "I want to thank you for pulling me out this morning. They had me cold."

"I never like to see that kind of odds against a man. But they'll try again. Don't get caught out in the open."

"You better watch sharp, too," Parker said flatly. "I saw the look in that gunfighter's eyes. He'll be after your scalp."

"Maybe we all ought to fort up," Mary suggested. "That way we would have a little better chance."

Dan shook his head. "I'm hoping that when Pres hears I'm here, he'll come to his senses. Maybe it will end now."

"Well, if trouble comes, just fire a shot and I'll come runnin'," Bill said. He looked at Mary. "We better be gettin' home, Sis." She nodded, but before mounting she went to Dan and kissed him. In the saddle she turned to wave back at him.

CHAPTER V

An Arrogant Man's Redemption

KNOWING his father would come, Dan stayed close around the yard, waiting. Mrs. Anderson called him to the house and he saw that she had prepared a meal for him. He ate quickly and left, uncomortable in her presence. She seemed dazed, but she also seemed determined. He had a feeling that she would have come back here with or without him. He went down to the barn and worked awhile on his saddle and at three o'clock, he heard hoofbeats. He moved quickly outside, but when he saw a lone rider he relaxed. He recognized his father's solid shape.

Pres Thompson rode into the yard and

saw Dan by the barn and rode toward him. He pulled up a short distance away and sat straight and square on the leather. His face held a contained and dangerous anger. When words came they were brittle with that anger.

"You used my beef to hold down the rights to this land. I'm taking them back."

"I didn't say what I was going to use them for. I said you owed them to me and you did. I have your bill of sale. The man who tries to take them away from me will be shot."

"What's got into you? I though you were the one who was against any killing. This morning you throw down on one of my men and then you move out here just asking for a fight."

"The Cross T did a woman a wrong. I intend to set it right. As right as I can, which is a long ways from right. I don't propose to allow you or anyone else to stand in my way. You've ridden roughshod over everyone for a long time. It's time you were stopped. I don't want to fight you, so I hope you let it drop right here."

Pres Thompson's face showed a moment of pure shock, but the moment passed and the old arrogance asserted itself.

"You haven't got the sand to make it stick. I'm coming back here tonight and you better be gone."

He yanked his horse's head viciously around, jabbed with his spurs and went away at a dead run. Dan felt sick. It was a terrible thing to realize, but there was nothing human left in his father. Every decent instinct had been extinguished in his brutal need for power.

Dan saw Mrs. Anderson standing in the doorway but as he came up, he realized that she didn't even know he was there. Her gaze was still on Pres Thompson and that gaze held hatred greater than anything Dan had ever seen.

Dan said quietly, "Ma'am, I'm going to hitch up the team to the buggy. You can go over to the Parkers for the night. There's going to be a fight.

She turned to him slowly, reluctantly taking her eyes off Pres Thompson. "I'm not going. I want to be here when they come." Her face was the face of an old woman at that moment. It held all the bitterness and all the helpless fury that was bottled up in her and he realized that she was close to madness. Close enough that anything might tip the scales one way or another.

He said, "All right, ma'am," and turned away, not liking what he saw in her.

He went back to the barn, gloomy and angry at himself. He could have ridden away and left the nesters to fight their own battles. Now he stood alone with little chance of survival. His thoughts got blacker and blacker as he wondered what he would do when the time came to throw down on Pres. He remembered what Pres had said about him not having the killer instinct and had his moment of bad doubts about that. But he shrugged them off. His father had a picture of him in his mind that was not a true picture. As far as Wes Clarke or any other man was concerned, he could kill if he had to. But about his father, he didn't know. He didn't think he could shoot Pres. He wondered if Pres could shoot him.

THE afternoon passed swiftly. At five-thirty, Dan went from the barn to the house and ate with Mrs. Anderson. She ate silently and quickly and refused to look at him. When he had finished eating, he rose, intending to go back out. But then he felt he should say something to her and stopped.

"Ma'am, it's going to be pretty rough for awhile, but you'd do better if you let go. Don't keep it all bottled inside. Let go and get rid of it and then maybe you'll begin to forget."

She said in a tired, bitter voice, "I want to, but I can't. I just keep seeing him lying there in the dust and I keep geting tighter and tighter inside."

"Think about it, but cry it out," he said and went outside. He heard her moving around inside, but she was not crying.

Sitting outside, Dan watched the sun slowly slide down the sky. It was almost

dusk when they came. He saw them a long ways off and got up and went into the house. Mrs. Anderson watched him with a fixed attention, no fear in her eyes at all.

"They're coming," he said. "I only see two of them, but it may be a trick. We'll wait in here until we're sure. Have you got a shotgun."

She nodded, moved into the storeroom, and came back with the gun. He took it from her and checked the loads, then placed it beside the doorway. He went to the window and watched the two men ride up—his father and Wes Clarke. That puzzled Dan for a little, then he thought he understood. He himself had ridden with the crew and they all liked him. They had refused to come. Hard as they were, the thought of a father turning on his son would be too much for them.

So there was only Clarke to worry about. It was enough. Dan's real regret then was thinking of the loveliness of Mary Parker. If he came out second best with Clarke, it would mean the end of something that could have been fine.

The two riders halted in the center of the yard, fifty wards out, then started again toward the house at a slow walk and finally drew rein only ten yards out. When Pres Thompson's voice reached Dan he thought he detected a note of regret in it.

"He pulled out, just like I said he would."

Dan said coolly, "I'm right here and I've got you both on the hip. I've got you skylighted."

Clarke didn't like that and his face showed a quick break of fear. But Pres Thompson's face showed nothing. He said, "We are going to burn this place down. Come out of there."

Dan hesitated only a moment, then walked quickly to the door and stepped outside. The light was fading, but he had a clear enough picture of the two of them there. He moved sideways from the door, keeping his constant attention on Wes Clarke. The gunman's yellow eyes glittered and the plain hatred he held brought up a film of sweat on his forehead. His hand was down near the gun on his hip.

"I see they turned you loose," Dan said, speaking directly to Wes Clarke. "I told you if you ever set foot on my land, I'd kill you. Well, I'm running beef on this land."

Clarke's voice was high-pitched with rage. It was that rage that Dan was counting on to unsettle Clarke, to make him miss. "No man ever throwed down on me and lived! I'm going to blast your belly open."

"Wait a minute," Pres Thompson ordered. "There will be no fight here. Dan is going to move off."

"I'm staying," Dan replied bleakly. He added softly, "If I have to kill you both."

"You'll never get a gun out of leather!" Clarke cried.

HE WAS facing Dan head-on and he turned the horse slightly until his right side was free. He was at an angle. He waited another tense second, then his hand stabbed down and came back up with his gun. Dan had been watching and had seen Clarke's shoulder settle as he started the draw. Dan matched that draw, brought his gun out and up, thumbing the hammer. He heard Clarke's gun explode and felt the brush of that quick shot. He had Clarke squarely in the sights then. He dropped the hammer and let the gun come back to his side, knowing he could not have missed at this range, knowing Clarke's rage had saved him, Dan Thompson.

Wes Clarke jerked erect in saddle, a lean and dangerous figure. Then the yellow eyes went blank and all his muscles went loose and he pitched from saddle. He hit the ground hard and bounced onto his back. He didn't move again.

Suddenly remembering, Dan bent and wheeled to face Pres Thompson. Pres had his gun out, but he hadn't fired. For one brief moment he and his son stared at each other, and in that moment Dan knew that Pres was not going to fire on him and knew that he could never have fired on his father. But then in action too fast

really to comprehend, Mrs. Anderson stepped through the door of the house, the shotgun in her hands.

She cried, "I'm going to kill you for killing him!"

There was this one frozen second. Pres Thompson had his gun out and he could have killed Mrs. Anderson. He actually raised the gun, but didn't fire. He bowed his head as if to receive a blow and that was the way he sat when the full charge of both barrels of the shotgun hit him in the chest. He was thrown from his horse by the tremendous force of the blast.

Dan moved then, running to him, knowing there was nothing he could do. It had happened so fast he hadn't had time to move. But one clear thought rang through his mind with immediate clarity and he felt a sudden and complete pride. Pres could have killed the woman and held his fire. He had died rather than fire on her. Dropping to his knees beside the still form, he lifted his father's head from the dust and held him like that for a minute. When he was sure Pres was dead, he got up and, catching his father under the arms, lifted him over the saddle of his horse. It was a strange thing, but at that moment, he felt nearer to his father than he ever had in his life.

There were shouts and the sounds of running horses. Bill and Mary Parker rode at full gallop into the yard, Parker holding a Winchester across his chest. They drew rein and came on slowly.

Mary swung down and ran to Dan and put her hand on his arm in sympathy. "I'm sorry, Dan."

He said tightly, "No. don't be. It was better that it happened now, before anyone else was hurt. I'm going to take him home."

"I'll go with you," she said and went back to her horse and mounted. Dan swung up on the dead Clarke's horse and took the reins of his father's horse. Bill Parker stood in front of the doorway of the house, his arms around Mrs. Anderson. She was sobbing uncontrollably against his chest. Dan rode from the yard. Once out of earshot of Mrs. Anderson, he looked over at Mary, wanting to tell her how it was. "She shot Pres. He could have killed her and he held his fire and took it. It makes it better. I can have some pride in him now. He made a lot of bad mistakes, but when all the chips were down, he acted like a man. It makes all the difference."

She smiled a little sadly. "What drives us away from what is right, Dan? What drove him?"

"I don't know the answer," he said simply.

She looked at her brother and Mrs. Anderson and her eyes suddenly held softness. "I hope Bill marries her some day. They're both young; they need each other."

He shook his head in mute wonder. "How can you plan so far ahead?" Then he smiled. "But you're probably right. In the meantime, though, do your worrying about us."

She reached over and laid her hand in his, sweetly smiling. "About us, Dan? There's no worry about us."

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GAMBLER'S RANGE

By LIN SEARLES

They thought him a tinhorn, and Gentry meant to change that—or to die trying

THIS mid-day's high-soaring sun was a blinding tawniness over Pahute Gap when Tim Gentry left Hunderson's Livery and strolled down Union Street's loose boards toward the Stockman's Rest.

The long ride in from his Rafter G had deepened Gentry's already somber mood, and the meager pleasures of Pahute Gap had long ago lost their savor. But he was not welcome at Hugh Varnum's Long Arrow, and his only recourse was to brace the old cattleman when Varnum came into town for his usual Saturday poker game.

He saw Liberty Varnum, old Hugh's daughter, go into the Emporium. He tried to think of some business that

would take him into that place, almost immediately shrugging the thought aside. Passing Keogh's Feed Store, his glance bent across the street and fell on the Mazeppa Saloon's weather-grayed front.

Two men idly slouched in the shade of the Mazeppa's wooden overhang. Their heads lifted under the quiet steadiness of Gentry's attention; their bodies shifted to a taut alertness, and Gentry could feel the unceasing pressure of their hostile stare between his shoulder-blades even after his even pace had taken him past that point. He thought, The Furtaw boys again—and that is a chore that will have to be taken care of some day soon.

He had turned to take the Stockman's broad steps when Matt Quinn, Pahute Gap's marshal, came out through the Stockman's double doors.

Gentry said, "Morning, Matt."

"Afternoon, you mean," said Matt Quinn. He was an older man with an older man's wise and sardonic tolerance, and he gave Gentry his half-amused regard. "Tim, after six months of ranching, I should think you'd throw away those gambler's clothes you wear and start looking like a rancher."

"Six months of ranching on this range," Gentry replied, "is still a gamble."

"Just so," said Quinn. "And sometimes your hand is not as strong as you think it is."

"It isn't the cards alone on which a man wins," Tim Gentry objected.

"You should know," said Quinn. He lifted his gaze, looking past Gentry to the other side of the street, then brought his eyes back to Gentry.

"I saw them," Gentry murmured.

"Choto Dufrane's wild cards," said Quinn, and stepped around Gentry. "So long."

GENTRY listened to Matt Quinn's retreating footsteps, wondering how much the lawman knew. Before Gentry quit his job as house dealer for Choto Dufrane's Mazeppa he had shot and killed Elko Holly, a Texas gunman. Bill-Joe and Al Furtaw, who did Dufrane's gun chores, were Holly's cousins. Ordinarily the Furtaws would promptly have come gunning for Gentry. They had not, and Gentry suspected that Choto Dufrane, for some reason known only to his own scheming mind, was holding them back.

Gentry stepped quietly to the near end of the bar caught the eye of the bartender, Ike Magoffin, and silently wigwagged for a drink. Price Corsline of the Double Bit and Rolph Pinsa, Pahute Gap's banker who were standing together farther down the bar, looked up and gave their briefest nods of greeting, immediately turning their attention away from him.

There was this guarded acknowledgement of his presence, this bare and quickly withdrawn courtesy from men with whom Tim Gentry had been on pleasant terms a few months ago. He felt the slow anger in him stir and churn itself to acrid bitterness.

Magoffin set glass and bottle on the cherrywood, saying in a low tone, "You let it ride you too hard, Tim. It shows in your eyes. Give 'em time."

"You are a true philosopher, Ike," said Gentry, and his sour mood left him. His smile lightened the heaviness of his features; his eyes crinkled at the corners and the smokiness vanished from them. He poured a drink, murmured, "How," and tossed it down.

"Better," Magoffin grunted, and turned away to resume his endless polishing of glasses.

Gentry poured another drink, not wanting it, but not wanting to remain here idly and with empty hands. HughVarnum was not here yet, and Gentry forced his impatience aside, knowing he might have a long wait. What would happen to his Rafter G depended on Varnum's answer to what Gentry meant to ask the big rancher.

The Rafter G had not been much of a ranch when Gentry had first taken it over. It was more of a challenge, which he met with a stubborn impatience, until after this last roundup when he had sent as many cattle through the loading chutes as any of the other smaller ranches. But

Gentry knew this wasn't enough.

He would have to have more grass and run more cattle in order to keep the ranch going.

Hemmed in on three sides, Gentry could only move one way—to the Flathorn Brakes, range controlled by Varnum. It was poor grazing for shorthorns, which was why Varnum had not used it for years, but Gentry knew that Herefords could thrive on it.

The burr under the saddle blanket was Hugh Varnum himself. For the old cattleman, the first rancher in this territory, had grimly held on to all the range he considered his by right of prior occupation. And Gentry sensed that Varnum was the leader in Pahute Gap's skeptically resentful view of Gentry's change from gambler to rancher.

Gentry's cigar had become a fragile cylinder of forgotten ash when he heard the creak of the double doors and felt the soft rush of air strike the back of his neck. He turned, to see Hugh Varnum standing there, a bulky shape against the door's slatted light.

Varnum's voice rumbled up from his huge belly. "I received your message, Gentry. The answer is—no."

Gentry said, "You have not given it careful thought. You have not used the Flathorns for over three years. It is range that is doing you no good. Why not let another man make use of it?"

Varnum's voice ran deeper and slower. "Thirty years ago I put my cattle on that grass. I held it by fighting for it against Indians, rustlers and nesters. Why the hell should I give it up now to some greasy-sack outfit?"

"Free land," Gentry observed gently.

"Free, hell! I paid for it with blood and sweat."

"Then," said Gentry flatly, "you'll have no peace from this time on. Your crew will spend all of their time riding Flathorn, and nights will be sleepless."

VARNUM'S eyes widened and stared in a way beyond belief. "You'd start a range war?"

Gentry shook his head. "No war. But I need that range and I intend to use it, with or without your say-so."

Varnum rubbed a hand over his grizzled mustache. "Listen, Gentry, this valley has lived in peace for a good many years. I do not want to see guns lifted again. I will make you a proposition. I will buy the Rafter G from you."

"No," Gentry said stubbornly. "You can fight me, but you can't buy me."

"All right," said Varnum, and his voice rose sharply and warningly. "Then hear this, Gentry. Go on back and start your play. But any Rafter G brand I see on Long Arrow range will become buzzard bait!" He gave Gentry the full, wicked toughness of his glance and moved past him.

Gentry stared after the big rancher a moment, thinking, So now the cards are face-up. He watched Varnum join Corsline and Pinsa, and heard Varnum's soft, deep-toned chuckle. He set his unfinished drink down on the bar and turned away sharply, pushing through the double doors.

Union Street ran sullen and sluggish in the early afternoon's torpor. A rider jogged listlessly toward Hunderson's, and One-Time Charlie's sorry hound barked feebly, shook himself of dust, then gave it up and crawled back under the watering trough. The Furtaws were gone from in front of the Mazeppa. A woman's scolding voice lifted sharply and fell away; a buckboard made its slow way down Union's center dust. Gentry recognized the driver as Liberty Varnum, and he held himself at the walk's edge, unable to bring his gaze away from this girl, and feeling a quick anger at himself.

Liberty Varnum looked over that way, her eyes darkening with a sober interest. Gentry touched his hat with grave politeness, not smiling, and saw her thoughtful frown as she swung the buckboard directly into his path. Dark hair made a lustered glow accentuating her even features. She sat straight and proudly supple in the buckboard's seat, and she turned toward Gentry with a slow swing.

"You've seen my father?"

"Yes."

"I would guess you found no satisfaction in it."

"You would guess right," Gentry said bitterly. "He offered to buy me out."

"From him," Liberty Varnum murmured, "that was a compliment."

"It's grass I need, not compliments," Gentry said. "The only way I can move is to the Flathorns, and there a man is playing dog-in-the-manger."

Liberty Varnum said in a soft and musing voice, "You don't have to grow any bigger."

"It's either that or quit. A small ranch can no longer be operated at a profit."

Liberty Varnum said gently, "Have you considered that perhaps Pahute Gap has a right to withhold its judgment? One day you running a table in Dufrane's deadfall, the next day you are running cattle. Can't you see how people would react to that? They need time to adjust their opinions, and you have given them none. You thought they should accept you right away, and you were hurt when they didn't. I suppose that is why you still dress like a gambler. Let us agree they are wrong—but you are wrong, too."

Gentry said, slowly, bitterly, "I had thought a man could build a new life. I find others do not agree."

Liberty Varnum gathered up the reins, giving Gentry a long, deeply regretting look. Her final words were strangely keyed, filled with an inexpressible gentleness that lifted Gentry's head.

"Patience is a branch of justice, Tim. Why do you think I have waited so long?"

She flicked the reins and drove away. Gentry watched the buckboard's trailing dust plumes, his thoughts wandering off darkly.

TWO years ago he had ridden out of a smoky past and found himself in Pahute Gap, intending to have his drink and a game and ride on. And that day, standing in front of the Mazeppa, he had seen Liberty Varnum ride by. She had given him her brief but vitally interested look and ridden on. And to Gentry it was as though a sweet and cool wind had touched him and passed, leaving its gentleness upon him, filling him with a vague and indescribable longing. And he had gone back into the Mazeppa and asked Choto Dufrane for a job.

He realized the difference in their positions and made no effort to intrude himself into Liberty Varnum's life. But Pahute Gap was a small town, so they'd had their casual meetings and their murmured courtesies and gone their separate ways; and the loneliness and longing had grown upon Gentry with each of these, sharpening his dissatisfaction with this rut which he had grooved by his own earlier choice of a way of life. So that when Dan Plew had offered him the Rafter G at a good price, Gentry had bought it. Only to find that in the eyes of the town he was still a gambler!

He thought, Man's life is written in the dust of his own back-trail, and the brave tunes he whistles are lost in the wind's rushing. He turned, hearing somebody call his name, and saw Matt Quinn coming toward him with his slow stride, a knowing shrewdness darkening his eyes.

Quinn said, drily gentle, "It's my business to walk the middle of the street. Others stay on one side or the other of the deadline."

Gentry's glance was challenging. "Which side do I belong on?"

"That's something a man answers for himself. And if he cannot answer, then the world must make their answer for him from what they can see. Sometimes their answer is wrong, but they can only judge by appearances—and the rustling of the leaves."

"Court is dismissed," drawled Gentry. "The prisoner was found not guilty, but he had already been hanged."

"He helped hang himself," Matt Quinn said, and went on.

Gentry drew a long, troubled breath, deeply pondering Matt Quinn's enigmatic remarks. Somewhere in the lawman's oddly guarded speech there was an answer, and all at once Gentry thought he

knew what it was. He crossed over to the Mazeppa.

The Mazeppa Saloon squatted inelegant and untidy on Union Street's wrong side. An unbroken murmur of slurred talk filtered through the slats of the swing doors; somebody struck two jarring and dissonant chords on the piano; a man's voice rose in raging irritation, "That's three damn splits you've dealt!"

Gentry paused just inside the door, giving this room his quiet and careful look, remembering that not long ago he had been a part of this disorder. Choto Dufrane and the Furtaws were standing at the far end of the room, silently watching the faro game. Something had set one of the Rochester lamps swinging, and its yellow light splashed upon them and fell away in a weary rhythm. Dufrane looked up, saw Gentry, and his eyes turned dark and inscrutable. He said something to the Furtaws in a low voice, and knifed his way among the tables to the front of the saloon.

Choto Dufrane said, "You've become a stranger, Tim." He spoke around the cigar clamped between strong, white teeth; the blue smoke spiral broke off and lost its shape. He gripped Gentry's arm and led him to a table.

Gentry leaned forward in the chair, resting folded arms upon the table. "Choto, it's my impression you are interferring in people's lives. Somebody has been keeping a rumor alive that I am your man. I think it's time you put an end to it."

Dufrane said, his tone half-amused, "What would you like me to do?"

"You started it," Gentry said flatly. "You figure out your own way to stop it."

DUFRANE'S eyes became brightly intent. "I've spent many years in the study of men, for upon that knowledge my living depends. I knew this moment would come, Tim. I will not admit I was responsible for any rumors, nor will I make any public admission that they are not true. But I have a proposition for you."

"This," Gentry said, wearily ironic, "is my day for propositions."

"Then listen, my friend. I control the, let us say, the amusements of Pahute Gap. But I am limited to the area this side of the deadline. I've the ability to make money when the way is open for me. My limitation is that I am not the man to open up new ways. I'm a business man, but not a leader. If I had that ability, I could control all of Pahute Gap."

"And make it another outlaw town?"

"Why not?" Dufrane said intently. "You are the man who could supply that push I lack. You could tip the scales. This town has no real leader. Varnum is getting old and his power is waning. The others follow him from force of habit. And Varnum is willing to let well enough alone, which is why Matt Quinn will do nothing, since Quinn is Varnum's man. I haven't mentioned this before because the time wasn't ripe. But I knew that some day you and Varnum would clash, and that you would lose."

"Why not back me in getting the Flathorn range then?"

Dufrane smiled, slowly shaking his head. "Oh no, my friend. Once you make a go of that ranch and are accepted, then Choto Dufrane is done. For you will be strong enough to lead these people, and I can't hold out against an organized town. You will want to make a civilized country out of this. That's a thing that would prevent me from making money."

Gentry pushed his chair back, coming to his feet. "Looks like a Mexican standoff, Choto."

"Think it over," said Dufrane, his tone unmoved. And his assured chuckle followed Gentry to the doors.

The Mazeppa's swing doors fanning close behind him, Gentry took a cigar from his pocket and bit the end off savagely. Dufrane's proposition had appealed to him more strongly than he cared to admit. He had had his moments of bitter rebellion at the hard work and long hours of building up the ranch; he had his secret yearnings for the old wildness and freedom and easy money of earlier days.

There was this streak in his nature that Dufrane had seen and played upon, this desire to rise above lesser men.

There was another thing that Dufrane had not mentioned, and the thought of this made Gentry halt his match halfway to the cigar. The Furtaw boys worked for Dufrane, and it was Dufrane who was holding them back from taking up their old feud with Gentry. If Gentry kept the ranch and aligned with the other side of the deadline, then the Furtaws would be released. He lit his cigar, inhaling slowly, letting the smoke out in a long sweep. The wise and prudent course would be to go back and see Hugh Varnum, and accept his offer to buy the Rafter G.

Varnum was at the back table of the Stockman's, engaged in a desultory game of stud with Pinsa and Corsline. Seeing Gentry making his way toward him, he leaned back in his chair and hooked his thumbs in his vest. His eyes glinted with a frosty interest.

"You ready to take my offer?"

"How much?"

"Why," said Varnum, enjoying this, "I reckon I could give you five thosand. Six thousand if you include a promise to get out of Pahute Gap."

"Worth five times that," Gentry said evenly. "Go or stay."

"Not to me. And without Flathorn grass it will be worth nothing to you."

"The hell with it then," Gentry snapped, and started to turn away.

A SUBTLE change of expression came over Varnum's face. "Wait, Gentry! You are a gambler. Here is what we can do. We'll play poker—Flathorn range against the Rafter G! With the value set at your figure."

"You have yourself a bet," murmured Gentry. He said to Corsline and Pinsa, "Gentlemen, if you don't mind—" and dropped into the chair vacated by Corsline, opposite Varnum.

Varnum swept the cards into his massive hands, squaring their edges against the table. "I was always lucky against you, Gentry. Will it be draw or stud?"

"Stud is faster. Make the hole-cards blind."

"You value the Rafter G at twenty-five thousand? I think it fair to say Flathorn is worth the same." Varnum cut chips into even piles and pushed a stack to Gentry. "Make the blues a thousand. I'd like to get this over with."

Gentry said, his quiet tone cutting into the stillness of this room, "Your deal, Varnum."

He watched Varnum shufflle the plaid-backed deck of Steamboats, cutting them casually when Varnum slid them across the table to him. He drew a trey face-up on the second round.

Varnum had a Jack showing. He tossed a red chip to the center. Gentry tossed in a blue.

"Raise it five hundred. You asked for a gamble, and you're going to have it."

Varnum threw him a heavy-lidded glance and called with another red. He dealt again, the cards almost lost in his hands. He turned up a Jack for Gentry and dealt himself an ace.

"Odd," murmured Gentry. "When I was a gambler, we played for the pure enjoyment of it. Now it's for blood, and I doubt that either of us can give a good reason."

Varnum looked up swiftly, throwing two blue chips into the pot. "You're like me in too many ways, Gentry. Perhaps that's why, and when you get older you'll understand."

"Parhaps," said Gentry. "Raise two more blues."

"Sucker play," said Varnum, calling. He flipped the two top cards face up, muttering, "Ten—queen." He gave Gentry a long, studied glance and pushed five blues into the pot. "There are times, Gentry, when I wish we could see things alike. But when a man can build up a broken-down ranch back up in that short a time—"

"And five," murmured Gentry. He leaned back, waiting.

Ike Magoffin, coming over to watch, drew in a sharp breath. Corsline muttered "Shut up!"

Gentry said, speaking slowly, "There

comes a time in a man's life when he has to make a choice. It's hard to understand why other men will not let him choose the right road."

Varnum frowned. "You gambling or giving a lecture. I think you're bluffing, but I'll only call . . . This is the last card coming up."

"Run them," said Gentry. He watched a nine fall into his hand and a king drop alongside Varnum's other four cards. This would end it, he knew. Varnum was stronger showing, and any high card in the hole would give Varnum the better hand.

Varnum again pushed out five blue chips, a slight smile breaking the gravity of his heavy features. "Read them, friend, and pause to consider."

"It's a sorry thing," reflected Gentry, "when a man gets so high on the ladder he is afraid of another man climbing. I'll raise you five." He shoved the last of his chips into the pot.

"Which is the end of it," said Varnum, matching Gentry's gesture. He turned over his hole card, showing an eight. "Ace-high, which I think is enough to win this."

Gentry flicked the corner of his hole card, giving it the most casual of glances. His eyes turned a darker and more somber gray, and he said in a voice dry as dust. "It holds up. You win, Varnum." He turned the face-up cards down upon the hole card and pushed the hand to the center of the table.

HUGH VARNUM let out a slow, deep breath. There was this consideration in him that made him ask, "What now?"

Gentry said, "Can we keep this among ourselves until I take care of a chore?"

Varnum's glance swept the room with peremptory sharpness. "That's agreed."

Gentry said to Rolph Pinsa "If you'll take care of that deed, I'll be in to sign it later on." He came to his feet then and made his way to the door. A thought came to him before the next stride brought him outside. He turned and added, "If I shouldn't get there, you have witnesses."

Crossing to the Mazeppa, he found Choto Dufrane drinking *creme-de-menthe* at the bar. He knew what he would have to tell the saloon-owner, and the thought brought a slight ironic curl to the corners of his lips.

Dufrane said, curiosity making his voice rise, "You look like you have just swallowed the canary."

"So I have," said Gentry, letting his voice carry sharp and clear through the saloon's rattle of talk. "I just swallowed the Flathorn range. I beat Varnum in a poker game."

"By hell—" said Dufrane, and let his voice trail off. He shrugged, turning to the bar. "You have made a mistake, my friend, but we will have a drink to your luck—good or bad."

"He'll have a bellyful of lead!" a brittle voice called out, rolling its rough challenge the length of the bar.

The last words echoed into a silence that blanketed the room as completely as though all the world had been stilled. Three punchers at the center of the bar left their drinks and moved quietly back among the tables. The bartender placed both hands palms-down upon the mahogany; a dealer laid his cards softly upon the table and folded his arms across his chest.

Gentry thought, Bill-Joe in plain sight, but where is brother Al?

It wasn't like either of the Furtaws to brace a man alone. They were the type either to bushwhack or set up a whipsaw. This knowledge was an uneasy pressure upon Gentry, and he had his rueful regret at his own impatience, knowing now that he should have waited.

Dufrane's huskily mild voice murmured into this silence. "I don't completely understand this, Don. But I am out of it." And he moved away to merge with the farthest shadows in the room.

Gentry said tonelessly, "This has been a long time in the making, Bill-Joe. Let's get on with it."

Bill-Joe Furtaw's lips pulled apart in a taunting smile; his eyes were brilliant and deadly points of black light.

"Why hurry, Gentry? The day is young and the waiting is pleasant. Stand there a space and think of Elko Holly."

All right, Gentry thought, he's marking time to give Al a chance to come from somewhere. It will be the side door or maybe he'll go clean around and come up on my back. Either way, he knew, would put him in a dangerous position. Time ran its breathless seconds; the hard proddings of panic tightened Gentry's muscles. He could think of no way to goad Bill-Joe Furtaw into making his play, and some vague prompting in the deep well of his conscience would not let him be the first to draw.

He saw the light rip along the narrow line of Bill-Joe Furtaw's eyes then he saw this Furtaw's body shift and his arm drop. The measure of this room lessened until it held only this narrow strip of burning space and the shape of the man at the end of it. The tenseness left him, leaving a cool, impersonal wind that whipped his body. He knew his gun was away from leather; he felt the kick and heard the roar of it as he dropped. Lead sang its wicked song above his head. He thought he heard a shot somewhere out in the street.

HE SAW Bill-Joe Furtaw raise his arms in an odd way and a vacant look wash over his face, leaving his eyes drained of life. Then Bill-Joe Furtaw cried brokenly, "Algernon! Algernon!" and dropped his arms to his sides and slumped to the floor.

Gentry came to his feet facing the swing doors, thinking with grim humor, Algernon! Good Lord! The doors fanned out and Al Furtaw pushed his way into the saloon, the muzzle of his gun tracking an obscure and witless pattern. Gentry brought his own gun up and, suddenly realizing, lowered it again. For Al Furtaw was dead. Whatever movements his body made, the man was dead, and the spreading stain on his shirtfront was the last of his life. And as Gentry watched, Al Furtaw broke in the middle and pitched on his face.

Gentry said wonderingly, "Now, how—" then saw Hugh Varnum's bulk filling the doorway.

Varnum said with deep-toned gentleness, "Come out into the fresh air, Gentry," and led the way to the Mazzeppa's shaded front, a smoking Colt dangling from one huge fist.

Gentry reached deep for wind, feeling as though all the strength had run out of him. Automatically he dropped his gun back into leather and followed Varnum outside. There was no relief in him, no elation and no regret. It was finished now, and he could ride out of this country without having to look back over his shoulder. He had enough money left in the bank to pay the Rafter G hands, and the next town along the trail would have its games.

Hugh Varnum holstered his gun and reached into a pocket, bringing out a small packet of playing cards.

He said gruffly, "Dammit, Gentry! Why you had a pair of tens. You had me beat, and you threw your hand in. Why?"

Gentry said, "Suppose I had won? What else would I have had except a ranch? Would I have been welcome in your house, or Corline's or Pinsa's? Would I have the respect and friendship of any of the decent people of this town? No, Varnum, each man has his weakness, and I have mine. I would not have been content to live with loneliness and bitterness eating into me. Sooner or later I would have broken out and gone Dufane's way. Now I can ride away, owning nothing, but knowing I won after all."

Matt Quinn walked past them, giving them his wise and knowing look. He stepped into the saloon and came back out, followed by Choto Dufrane. He said to Gentry, "You told them you won Flathorn?"

"Only way to bring them out in an open fight," replied Gentry. "I didn't want to have to look for them behind every mesquite bush between here and the Border."

Varnum said, "Matt, I think it is about time—"

(Continued on page 113)

Inside Frank Sinatra—
"A Million Bucks Worth
Of Loneliness."

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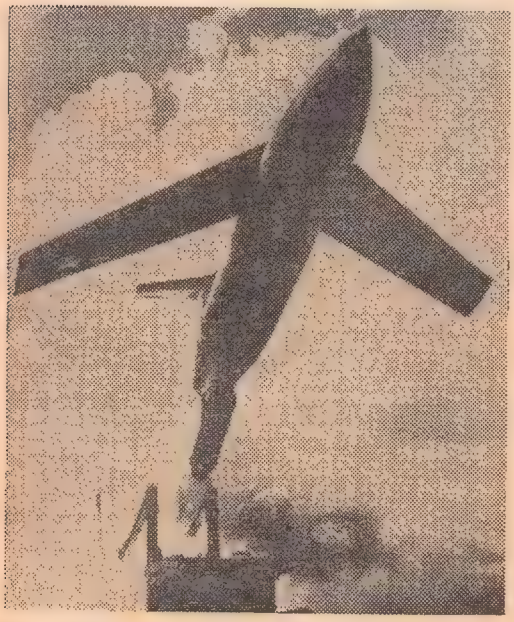

"We Are Losing Our Race For
The Death Missile!"
—by Representative Melvin Price,
Congressman from Illinois.

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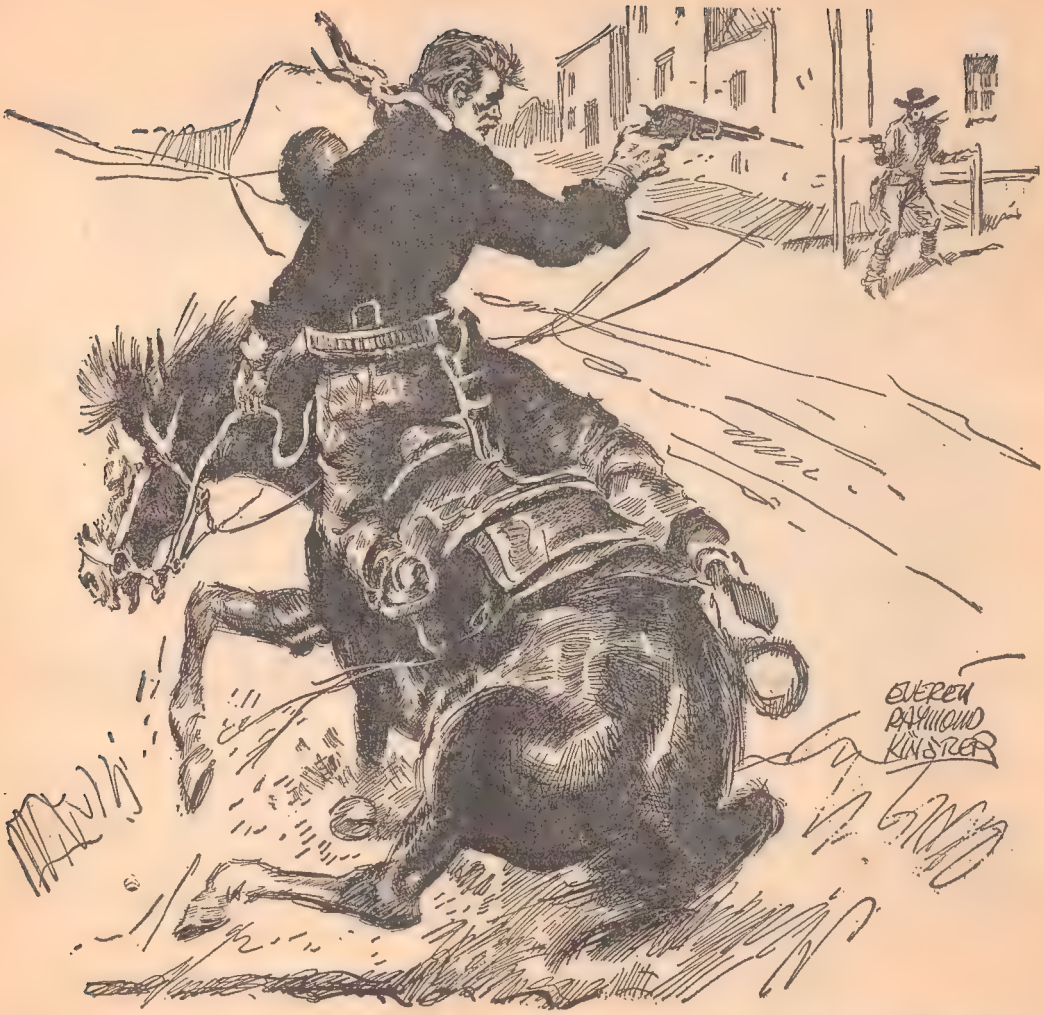

LAST CROOKED MILE

by ROBERT E. TREVATHAN

To most every man, as to
Frank Price, there's a fork
in the road that can mean
life and love or cold death

FRANK PRICE was a man who had not reached a showdown—with himself. And when the time did come for him to make up his mind, his decision came near to being the last one he ever made. But a sheriff had a little to do with it—and so did a girl.

Frank and his two trail companions were nearing the border of Indian Territory. On the way back from Abilene it had been hot and dusty, and today seemed

hotter and dustier than the rest of the days. And tempers were on edge. The twenty-five hundred herd of mixed cattle, choused out of the brushlands below San Antonio for their owners, had brought a fair price. The three cowpunchers had drawn their money. John Burdock and Kirk Ellis had gambled theirs away, but Price had hit a lucky run at faro and now carried more than three hundred dollars in the canvas money-belt around his middle.

Perhaps it was this more than anything else that made him a little reluctant to agree to have any part in the holdup of the Coldwater National Bank, which was planned to take place during the heat of the day.

But Kirk Ellis had his own ideas about Frank's hesitancy.

"It's that girl, Birdie," Ellis said to Burdock, using the big outlaw's incongrous nickname. He grinned, showing stained, squirrel-like teeth. "That's his trouble."

Burdock slapped a fly on his sorrel's neck and wiped his hand on his pants. He was a big, practical-minded man with deep black eyes, and long black hair shoved beneath a slouch hat.

"Don't you worry none about our boy," he said, nodding at Frank. "When the time comes, he'll be out front covering for us, just as planned."

Leisurely, Frank Price shifted his lean weight in the saddle. A lanky, blond, youngish man, his cool blue eyes had of late taken on the habit of continually sweeping the sun-dried land that lay about them.

His clothing, now dust-laden from the trail, was of a fine tan twilled material, and the carefully turned-back cuffs of his sleeves suggested that he was particular in his dress.

"Sweet sun-curied prairie grass, but she *is* a looker," he addressed the world at large.

Ellis spat over his saddlehorn in contempt. "Seeing Birdie, that's all he can think about. You'd think she was the only wench this side of—"

PRICE was riding close to Ellis, and his back-handed swat had a flat wet sound as it caught Ellis full in the mouth.

Ellis, wheeling his pinto, automatically snaked a slim hand down and came up with the Dragoon Colt from its low-slung holster. But in the same moment Burdock's sorrel crashed into Ellis from the opposite side and a thick meaty fist lashed across to slam hard against Ellis' forearm, making him drop the weapon.

"That's damn well enough from both of you!" Burdock ordered.

Price eased his own .44 Dance revolver into leather, smiling widely at Ellis, who off-saddled to pick up his sixgun. "I'd advise you to guard your tongue," he told Ellis calmly.

Ellis raked a sleeve across his cut lip, a burning lightness reflecting in his greenish eyes. "Next time you draw on me you'd better be prepared to carry through," he said, looking levelly up at Price. As Ellis mounted his pinto, he grumbled to Burdock, "He was right friendly last season with the sheriff in Coldwater, too."

"It's a big, wide and beautiful country," Frank Price said. "A lot of people in it." He patted his tall buckskin's neck.

"All right," snapped Burdock, a redness in his beefy neck slowly fading. "Let it ride." He jockeyed his mount between the other two, pretending to be unaware of his action. "That Coldwater bank should net us twenty or thirty thousand," he reminded again. "A posse's easy lost in the Territory. They're scared to go far. Then it's back to San Antone—far enough, safe enough." He grinned in satisfaction, and Price felt himself responding to the magic depth in the man's black eyes.

"I could use that stake," Price agreed. "A lot of respectable spreads have been built on less."

Ellis laughed sardonically. "You'll never do anything respectable," he predicted flatly. "You've been on the owlhoot a little too long."

And they'd done all right during the four years he'd been with Burdock, Frank thought. A few easy punching jobs, a little

practical rustling on the side, and once a bunch of horses of dubious ownership sold to the Army at Fort Griffin. He couldn't complain.

John Burdock chuckled deeply in his throat, his white teeth flashing against his three-weeks-old stubble of beard. "The town goes to sleep right after noon," he said. "We'll take care of our business and be gone before anyone knows what's happened."

Suddenly Price believed the job could be done, at that; and he could use that stake, for he was twenty-six and getting no younger. It would give him a chance to settle down, though he would have to make some kind of explanation to her, he thought.

Having rested and fed their mounts, the trio split up about five miles from Coldwater. Kirk Ellis swung wide to come up from the south side of town, and Burdock circled to enter from the west. Frank Price rode straight ahead.

It was noon when Frank rode into Coldwater. The town had only one principal street, Main, running north and south. A score of sun-weathered buildings lined its sides. Four saloons were scattered up and down the way, and a dozen or so horses were tied to various hitching-racks along the street. The Coldwater National Bank was on the east side of Main, at the second cross street. The sheriff's office and combination jail was located at the south end of town, below the bank. They would have to ride past there on their way out, Price mused, putting things into logical shape.

At the first cross street, he paused to let a team of mules pull an empty wagon by. A few mounted men were going about their business and Frank singled out one in particular—Emmit Rhodes, the sheriff.

Rhodes, a small, wiry man in his fifties, grinned affably when he saw Frank, the deep lines in his sun-blackened face relaxing. He approached Frank, thumbing back his hat to reveal a mop of silver-white hair.

"Thought it was about time some of you trail drivers were riding back through," he said. "How's the buckskin doing?"

FRANK patted his horse's neck. "Just fine, Sheriff." Frank had bought the mount from the lawman last season when his own had gone lame on the return trip from Abilene.

"Figured you're be satisfied," Rhodes said. He casually looked in the direction from which Frank had come, as if in search of Frank's companions. Then the sheriff reined his black mare around and together they headed down Main.

Frank looped his reins over his saddle-horn and began fashioning a brown-paper cigarette. "Nice quiet town you have, Sheriff," he said carefully.

Rhodes let his gaze wander from one side of the street to the other, nodding. "Let me show you something," he said as they reached to the second cross street. "Come along into the next block."

He turned left. Frank followed. To their right was a one-storied brick building that boasted a large plate glass window in front. Frank noted the fancy gold lettering on the glass:

THE COLDWATER NATIONAL BANK

A bald-headed man on the porch waved to the sheriff, and suddenly Frank Price felt his shirt sticking damply in the middle of his back.

They turned into a street running parallel to Main, and where some construction work was going up on a big frame building with a stable and some sheds behind it.

"The Southwestern Stage and Freight Company will soon be in operation," Sheriff Rhodes explained. "The line begins at Kansas City and will go to Fort Sill in the Territory. This is the meeting point in between."

He regarded Frank Price closely, his thoughts for his own son who had been lost in the war. Odd how this waddy should remind him of the lost son. "I'm going out to meet the first stage now," he announced. "Want to come along?"

"Sorry, but I've got some odds and ends

to see to," Frank said, knowing it was a lame excuse. "I'd like to get cleaned up. Been a long ride from cowtown."

"Yeah, guess so." Rhodes brushed it aside. "Say, this new outfit is looking for drivers, an agent or two—"

Frank caught the impilcation, but because of an inner restlessness born somewhere on his backtrail, he failed to respond. "Sounds like it's going to be a right sizable operation, Sheriff," he said noncomittally.

The lines in Emmit Rhodes' face deepened as the two rode back up the street. As they were coming back into Main, Kirk Ellis was riding in from the south. The sheriff's stare was thoughtful, as though he were trying to place the rider who was approaching. Frank felt tenseness in his innards, and was relieved a little when Ellis drew up before a saloon down the way. He wondered if Ellis' riding in from the south might momentarily confuse the sheriff, who must have seen Ellis before, but not face-to-face more than once.

If the sheriff had made any connection between Ellis and himself, Frank didn't guess it. He excused himself, saying that he was going to stop by to see someone at the Evans' General Store. The sheriff's features softened a little, and he wished Frank luck as they parted.

"See you around three o'clock—when I escort the first stage in," Rhodes said. "Maybe it'll wake this place up a little."

"Yeah, it might," Frank agreed, but he was thinking about something else that likely would bring the town to life before then.

The Evans' General Store wasn't an impressive structure, but Price thought the big, black-bordered sign atop the porch effective. He left his buckskin at the rail in front, and stepped onto the porch.

He was about to enter when abruptly he returned to his mount and led the buckskin two buildings down the street and tied up in front of a barber shop. Then getting a clean tan shirt from his blanket roll, he disappeared into the narrow building.

FORTY minutes later, his hair trimmed, his hat and pants dusted and his boots pretty well polished in spite of scuffed toes, he again approached the store, feeling more confident. In the doorway a wide-backed woman nearly collided with him, dropping the topmost parcel from her armful of bundles. Mumbling apologies, Frank retrieved the parcel and set it back in its precarious spot. The woman smiled at him and moved on past.

Inside, Frank surveyed the store, seeing no other customers. Then he saw the one he had come so far to see. She was sitting beside a window, candling eggs. He went up behind her noiselessly and said, "Careful there, young lady."

At the sound of his voice the girl—Jane Evans—whirled around, but not carefully. She dropped the egg she'd been holding up to the sun slanting through the window, her expressive brown eyes registering both pleasure and a little surprise.

"Frank Price! Scare me half to death." A smile played about the corners of her full lips as she looked at him, searching his face.

He placed his hat on a sealed-up barrel of crackers. "Seems it's my day to make people drop things," he observed. She was standing close to him, and he was well aware of this sudden nearness. He'd wondered and dreamed how it would be, seeing her again, and now he was well pleased.

She wore a printed calico dress that fitted her curves nicely, the long sleeves pushed up halfway to her elbows. As she knelt down to clean up the broken egg, Frank admired the tanned roundness of her forearms. Kneeling down beside her, he offered to help, but she waved his efforts aside. When she'd dumped the broken egg into a pail at the rear of the store, she came back to him and stood silently for a moment.

Then she said, "Last season you said you'd be back, but I didn't know for sure that you would. You seemed so reckless or something."

Deliberately, Frank began making a cigarette. "I thought maybe by now I'd

have made a stake," he said.

"Did you expect me to be waiting for you?" The question was straightforward, and the warm light in her eyes seemed to cool.

"You have your own life to live," he said carefully. "And nobody has a right to interfere unless you can be offered something to build on."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Now it was Frank's who was silent a moment, his thoughts running ahead. Then a quick eagerness came into his face, and he plunged into his future plans.

"Soon I'll have that stake, Jane. In a little while I'll be back for you and we can go to Texas. There's a place in Palo Pinto County, near Black Springs . . . . We'll buy a spread and some cattle and start pointing herds north within two-three years. It'll be for keeps!"

It all burst out at once, and he felt a little embarrassed, conscious that he was holding back the most important part of the whole thing.

Jane, sensing this, asked, "This stake, Frank. How are you to come by it?"

Tight-lipped, he lighted his cigarette, inhaling deeply of his first drag. He smiled confidently.

"You don't need to concern yourself about that," he said. "Everything's all right." But immediately he saw she doubted that. She hugged her arms tightly against her bosom, looking into his eyes, trying to read what lay behind them.

FRANK pinched the fire from his smoke. Impulsively, he pulled Jane to him, kissing her hard on the lips. She pushed at his shoulders, but then for an instant she responded, pressing her fingers into his back. When she jerked free, she stood there watching him, piecing out something in her mind.

"I'm scared, Frank," she finally said. "For I've just remembered something."

Involuntarily he stiffened, recalling her uncanny ability to get at the root of things. She went on, "A minute ago at the window I saw a man ride by whom I'd seen before. And I've just remembered where and when. He was one of the men you were here with last season."

Frank Price cursed silently. Anyone who got a good look at John Burdock wouldn't be likely to forget him. Not that beefy face and those black eyes. A less fitting nickname for him than "Birdie" it would have been hard to imagine. The mere size of the man singled him out in any crowd. And he was riding in from the west at this minute!

"I think you must be imagining things," he suggested.

"You don't have to lie to me, Frank. I remember that big. . . ."

He picked up his hat from the barrel and brought it down on his head. "And you don't have to tell me who I can pick for friends," he said evenly. "It so happens that the man you're talking about pulled me out of the flooded Salt Fork when we were swimming the herd across. He saved my life. How're you going to pay back something like that?"

She returned his level gaze. "If you had pulled him out would you have expected him to try to pay you back?"

Both knew the answer; he only grunted acknowledgment. Then she said, "I want you clean, Frank."

"How's that?"

"I don't like your friends."

"You never did tell me how your dad got his start after coming here from Indiana."

She looked away. "That's not fair. He's been dead two years now. I had to have something to hold on to. I think most of the people here respect me, the way I run the store."

"In spite of its beginnings?" Last season Frank had heard rumors of a letter of inquiry from Indiana concerning missing funds from a drygoods store where Ben Evans had worked before coming West.

Someone came into the general store then and Frank turned to go.

"Yes, I know about that, Jane," he said in parting. "It's all right . . . I'm coming back for you."

"But you don't understand—"

A woman's call for service interrupted

Jane, and then Frank was gone, long-striding out onto the porch and into the street.

She stood watching him go, moisture touching the corners of her eyes. She hadn't told him that she had repaid the Indianapolis firm the money her father had taken, and she doubted now whether she ever would. All of which she was sure was that something was wrong, terribly wrong. . . .

It was a quarter of two when Frank Price entered the Durham Saloon, leaving his buckskin tied outside beside a pinto. The few customers inside were gathered around the two front tables where poker games were in progress. Three townsmen were standing at the long pine bar, on his right, talking.

Burdock and Ellis were seated at a rear table. Their eyes met his, then flicked away. He then went over and took a chair beside Burdock, who as usual sat with his back to the wall, commanding a view of the batwings up front.

"Bartender, another glass here," Burdock called, his voice guarded to reach only the squat man in a dingy apron at the near end of the bar.

The bartender brought the glass, casually eying Price as he put it on the table beside a bottle that was still so nearly full that the bartender regarded it critically. Burdock didn't allow much drinking before anything important, but Frank poured out three fingers in his glass for appearance sake. No attempt at conversation was made until the bartender trudged back to the bar.

ELLIS spoke first, continuing something he had left unfinished a moment before. "He was riding along with the sheriff, Birdie, and talking as big as you please."

Burdock turned hard black eyes on Frank. "How about that, boy? Ellis seems to think you and that lawman are too thick."

"You know damn well I know him," said Frank, flinging his tobacco sack on the table. "What did you expect me to do when I ran into him—make like I'd never laid eyes on the man?"

Burdock slowly trickled more whisky into his glass from the bottle, his eyes fathomless. "Let it ride," he said finally.

But it wasn't Ellis' nature to let well enough alone. His greenish eyes held on Frank's clean shirt as he noted other things.

"Got a haircut, too," he said, showing his narrow, squirrel-like teeth. "Bet he's been calling on that—"

The sudden fierce hardness about Frank Price's mouth and eyes cut him off sharp, and he held Frank's stare a full five seconds. Ellis deliberately raised his drink and gulped two long swallows before Burdock knocked the glass to the floor.

"You damn well know about the drinking," Burdock said harshly.

Ellis scraped his chair back with a jerk, but Burdock stared him down and he began wiping at the spilled whisky on his pants.

"I can take my liquor," he muttered.

"There'll be time for that later," said Burdock. "Just take it easy." Then he asked Frank, "What did you find out?"

Frank lighted a cigarette, taking a long drag before answering. "The sheriff will be out of town for another hour," he said. "He's going out to escort a stage in for the new company."

Burdock allowed himself a short pull from his own glass, which until now had collected no rings on the table.

"Good," he said. "With the sheriff out of the way and the rest of the town taking siesta, things are looking up." He laughed silently, deeply, his voice not carrying to the men at the bar. Only the bartender gazed at them a little curiously.

Burdock stood up from the table, stretched, then casually went out. Ellis bored a menacing look at Price.

"Nothing better go wrong," he threatened, getting up to leave.

Alone at the table, Frank Price slowly counted to a hundred, then got up and placed the three-quarters full whisky bottle on the end of the bar before the squat bartender.

"We'll be back later to finish this," he lied to the man.

Outside, the sun was dazzling hot in its brightness, and Price pulled down his hat brim to shade his eyes. He stood on the saloon porch, watching the street. By now there was no movement about town, just as Burdock had predicted would be the case. Only a few loungers were along the shady store fronts on the west side of Main, and their relaxed forms in tilted chairs indicated they would remain that way through the heat of the day.

Frank saw Burdock's sorrel standing at the rail in front of the bank, as planned. Ellis was about to enter the bank, where Burdock would be in conversation with the manager about a loan that would never be transacted. Ellis stood at the bank's entrance a moment, looking in; then, as he stepped inside, he wiped his forehead with a blue handkerchief.

Frank Price caught the signal. He touched the butt of his Dragoon-like .44, knowing that it would clear leather easily. He ducked under the hitching-rail, snapped loose the slipknot which held the buckskin and swung aboard. The buckskin stood still as he leaned far over and gathered in the reins of Ellis' pinto. Then he started leisurely down Main, sitting high in the saddle and leading the other mount. It was about a block to the bank. He took his time.

A KIND of stillness lay over the town. It was almost a tangible thing, he thought, and he seemed to feel it through all the pores of his skin. He blinked his eyes against the pentrating heat of the sun, then looked again toward the bank. In another minute it would all be over. Burdock and Ellis, after persuading the banker to hand over the money, would come out on the bank's porch. Frank would be even with the bank then, in position to cover them while they reached their horses.

Seeing no one on the street, Frank concluded it would be an easy job. He was lucky, he guessed. He felt the reassuring sag of his money-belt: he was lucky at cards too. What about Jane, though? Something had been bothering her, as though she had wanted to tell him still more. Their meeting hadn't gone off as he'd planned. As far as she was concerned he hadn't been so lucky, he conceded.

It was at that moment, as Price was coming into the cross street on Main, that everything went wrong, wrecking Burdock's carefully laid plans. Wrecking Frank Price's, too. For coming toward him up the cross street, riding at a fast canter, was Sheriff Rhodes. And behind him a block and a half away came the initial stage-coach of the new company, wheeling along at a smart clip with a grim-mouthed oldster handling the reins, whooping and hollering and slapping his hat on the high seat.

The sheriff hailed Frank when forty feet away. "Came in ahead of schedule!" he yelled. "Old Bailey must have really been pushin' 'em." Nearing the bank corner, Rhodes reined his black mare to a walk.

Before Frank Price could say or do anything, Burdock and Ellis came through the doorway of the bank. Each held a drawn revolver, and each carried a canvas pouch in his other hand. At first they saw nothing amiss, only Frank sitting his saddle and holding the reins of Ellis' mount. Ellis stepped toward the pinto, but Burdock took a quick look up and down the street.

Soon as the sheriff came around the corner, things would start popping. Frank Price had about two seconds to consider his play. Sheriff Rhodes was sure to get his first, if Frank knew Kirk Ellis. It flashed through Frank's mind all at once that if he and his trail companions succeeded in this robbery, Emmit Rhodes would surely die trying to stop them. And afterward somebody just like Rhodes would be forever on their backtrail, and they'd never be completely at peace, no matter how far they rode. There was the debt Frank owed Burdock, true; but, seeing the sheriff calmly riding into what would become a death trap, everything

took on new perspective.

When Ellis spun and crouched low, his attention attracted by the oncoming stage and its whooping driver, Frank's mind was made up. Jane would want it this way too, he thought, and he realized suddenly how necessary it was for him to make the right move now.

Just as Rhodes reached the corner of the building, Frank Price motioned to him, calling out:

"Get back, Emmit!"

But at this instant Ellis leaped off the porch and saw the lawman at the corner of the bank. He sized up the situation at once, and even as Rhodes jerked reins, Ellis raised his Colt and fired. It was a snap shot, hastily executed, and the bullet caught the sheriff's wheeling mare high in the neck. As the mare, temporarily paralyzed, floundered and unseated Rhodes, Ellis whirled on Price, cursing. "You dirty son, you planned it!" he cried.

His face murderous, Ellis leveled down on Frank with his Colt; and recklessly Frank charged his buckskin forward at the gunman to run him down. Out of the corner of his eye as he plunged ahead, Frank could see that the stage had swung wide around the sheriff and his fallen mare and swerved in a dust-laden turn into Main Street. Then suddenly there was the sharp explosion of Ellis' weapon alongside the buckskin's neck.

THE slug, a stinging, pulsating force in Frank's left shoulder, toppled him from saddle. His mount slammed into Ellis, sprawling the gunman unconscious across the low porch of the bank. Painfully, wiping at the blinding dust in his eyes as the buckskin wheeled away, Frank looked up, half expecting to see Burdock mounted and well on his way.

But Burdock was not a man to turn and run when things got tough; neither was he a fool. He stood there on the porch, a practical man weighing his chances as Sheriff Rhodes, who had dropped behind his stunned mare for protection, calmly and in a businesslike way aimed a sixgun at his chest.

"All right, Sheriff, the game is over," John Burdock called gruffly, tossing his weapon over the edge of the porch.

Keeping his attention on Burdock, Rhodes went over and helped Frank Price to his feet. The sheriff's hat was gone, and the sunlight made his hair the color of pure-spun silver. He glanced at Frank's shoulder, seeing the blood.

"You'll get over that." Rhodes nodded. "But this was a foolish thing you tried here. At the same time I won't forget you gave me that warning."

They turned together then and walked up to the big man on the porch. Frank stood silently a moment.

"I—I'm sorry, Birdie," he said. "It just didn't seem right."

Something sober and fathomless flitted across Burdock's black eyes. He spoke without malice. "Forget it, boy," he said. "Guess it was in the cards all along. You should be a respectable man."

Jane Evans reached the jail where Frank Price was still talking to Sheriff Rhodes.

"About that job with the stage and freight outfit, Emmit," Frank was saying. "I'd like to hear more about it—soon as I'm square with the law, that is."

Rhodes grinned broadly, "Maybe that can be arranged," he promised.

Jane took Frank's hand. "You've got to let that shoulder heal before you begin yanking lines on a Concord," she said, gently touching the bandage that bound Frank's bullet wound. She gazed earnestly into his eyes. "I'm so glad you changed your mind, Frank—I mean about getting that stake as you'd planned. But perhaps this job with the stage company is what you were searching for."

The tenseness that had gripped Frank for the past few hours seemed to subside a little then, and he turned back to Sheriff Rhodes. "I have a little here in wages and card money," he said. "I'd like to open an account at the bank."

He saw the look of new-born hope and happiness in Jane's face and added, "Never can tell when a man might need a nest egg—like to buy a gold ring with."

When the law couldn't touch his mother's killer, the boy decided it would maybe work both ways . . .

SMART LAW

By BART MORGAN

I WAS sheriff of Matlin County when the killing took place. But that's getting ahead of myself. In order to tell this in proper order, I have to go back to the beginning and tell you about the woman who died, and the the woman's son—Johnny Morrow.

The wind was cutting cold and hard across the top of boothill the day we buried her. I was with a small group of folks who had come out to pay their last respects to Johnny's mother. Being well aware of how the boy felt, we all stood back from the grave, leaving Johnny alone, so he could spend those last few moments with his mother.

For a boy of fourteen, Johnn took the proceedings just about as man-like as anyone could ask. He stood there without moving, while the preacher went through his eulogy about the dead woman. The boy was still standing there when the other folks headed back to town, and I thought it was about time I took a hand, so I walked up.

I guess the noise of my boots scuffing across the frozen ground must have broken into his thoughts. He turned and looked up at me with red-rimmed eyes that had long ago exhausted their well of

tears. I saw Johnny pointing to the headboard on the grave that stated: "Died 1886." I could feel his slender body taut under my hand.

"She didn't die, Sheriff!" he shouted. "She was murdered!"

It's hell to be a sheriff and hear a boy of fourteen make a statement like that—especially when you're the sheriff and can't arrest the killer. It's even tougher to stand there fingering your badge and realize that maybe there's nothing you can ever do about it. Right then I felt about as small and worthless as a man can get.

I placed my hand on Johnny's shoulder and turned him toward the extra horse I had brought out from town. "Best we go now, son," I said gently. "We'll go back to my office and talk this thing out."

Johnny nodded and headed toward the waiting horses. Before we got there he jerked free of my hand and turned back toward the grave. A look of bitterness swept across his young face. "Cass Briggart will die for this, Maw!" he shouted hoarsely.

I felt a shiver go through my body. It wasn't the coldness of the day that caused it, just the sure knowledge that the boy was going to make his promise to his mother come true.

Later, we were back at my office sitting across the table from each other. The room was tight with silence, neither of us doing any talking. I tried to think of something to say, but I didn't have my heart in it.

Johnny looked up at me, his lips trembling. "You gonna arrest him, Sheriff?"

God, how I'd like to, I said to myself. But to Johnny who was waiting for my answer, I had to say something else. "We've hashed this over before, son," I said. "We both know Briggart's guilty but my hands are tied."

It took a lot out of me to sit there and tell that boy there was nothing I could do about the murdering skunk who had killed his mother. I had toted my badge for a long time, with all the pride and respect of a good lawman, but now it was hanging heavy on my chest and I was wishing it wasn't there.

I saw the tiny squint lines forming at the corners of Johnny's light blue eyes as he tried to fathom the meaning of my words. Then his face hardened and took on a cold look far beyond the scope of his years.

"He's guilty, Sheriff," he said, his voice heavy with meaning. "He took my maw's money and gambled it away, all the time promising to marry her. After it was gone he forced her out of the wagon." He paused for a moment, seeming to draw on his memory, then went on. "Made her get out of that wagon more than ten miles from town, knowing the worst blizzard in years was right behind them. She was froze to death when we found her."

"That's the point I'm trying to make you understand, son," I said quickly. "Cass Briggart didn't actually kill her with his own hands. It was the blizzard that killed your maw." Johnny shook his head, then I went on. "Briggart says your maw got out of that wagon of her own accord."

HOPING he could see my point, I waited silently. But the look on his face told me I hadn't gained an inch; maybe I had even lost a few. There was something about his stare that tore at my insides. I began to feel that Cass Briggart wasn't the only guilty one—I was in it too.

"Cass Briggart's clever, Johnny," I said, feeling my words wasted. "If we could get him to admit he forced your maw out of the wagon we'd have him good. But he's playing it cute, says she got out of her own accord. The law is funny, he's twisted it around to suit himself." I shook my head. "It ain't the kind of law I've been backing all these years, Johnny. Briggart's using the law to hide behind, making every legal loophole work to his own advantage."

Johnny pushed out of the chair his thin body stiff with proudness. Something in my last words had taken the anger out of him, leaving him hard and cold. He gave me a tight little smile but I could see there was no humor in it.

"So that's the law," he said slowly. "Two kinds. One for decent folks and another kind for rats like Briggart to hide behind." The smile on his face grew wider and colder. "I ain't full-grown but I think I get the meaning of your words." He headed for the door then he turned, a wise, knowing look on his face. "Your hands might be tied, but mine ain't. After Briggart's dead don't try to twist things around, Sheriff. Just remember that smart law you told me about."

After he was gone I just sat there, knowing there was something wrong with what I had said but I couldn't put my finger on it. I worried with the thought until I realized that Johnny was very young and could possibly be talking with the rashness of youth. After all there was nothing Johnny could do about getting Cass Briggart. There was nothing anybody could do—not even me.

Everything seemed to settle down for a few days after my talk with Johnny. I saw him several times each day and on the surface his manner was cool. He didn't appear to be thinking about Cass Briggart at all. In fact, during those few short days he appeared to take on size, adding years to his youthful body. That cold look was still in his eyes but I felt that even that would go with the passing of time.

I had to give Johnny credit, that's for sure. That boy didn't have a lazy bone in his body. He did odd jobs for all the tradesmen around town, keeping himself busy from morning till night. They all knew he was an orphan, but he was showing them all that charity and sympathy were something he didn't want.

The only job he was doing that I objected to was the one where he hung around outside the saloon, running errands for the gamblers who played inside. They often wanted cigars, new cards or a sandwich from one of the other stores down the street. It didn't take Johnny long to learn that the gamblers tipped high and handsome when he gave them fast service.

He was sitting outside of the saloon one afternoon when I was making my rounds. I knew Cass Briggart was inside gambling, so I thought I'd have a word with Johnny.

His eyes followed me as I crossed the street. "You seem to be getting along right well, son," I said as I stopped.

That same cold light was still in his eyes. "Not too bad, Sheriff," he said.

I hated to push at an old wound but I had to find out. "Hope you've forgotten about Cass Briggart?" I said.

Johnny's eyes played across my face. "Just waiting, Sheriff," he said steadily. "I've learned a lot about the law from Briggart. No call to do anything foolish."

I saw right then that he wasn't giving up on Cass Briggart. If anything, he seemed more determined than ever. Johnny was a fine boy and I couldn't help but admire him, regardless of the thing he had on his mind.

"That's hard thinking, Johnny," I said tightly. "Could get you into a lot of trouble."

"I don't think so, Sheriff," he said, shaking his head. "I appreciate your advice but this is between Briggart and me."

"There's still the law," I said evenly.

I never did see a young boy's face get so hard and cynical as Johnny's did right then. "I remember the law, Sheriff," he said, looking straight at me. "How could I ever forget it?"

THERE was nothing I could say other than I was sorry, and that had been said too much already. I turned and started down the boardwalk, my fists gripping so tight the white showed through on my knuckles.

I hadn't gone more than forty feet when I heard the batwing doors of the saloon swing open. I turned and saw Cass Briggart standing over the boy, his face contorted with anger. "Always hounding me like a damned dog!" Briggart yelled.

I saw Johnny's head lift slowly until his eyes were centered on the gambler's angry face. "Murderer!" he said, the one word filling the air with reviling scorn.

Cass Briggart stepped forward, his hand reaching down to grab the boy. I was hoping he would try to rough Johnny up

and that's where I could step in and nail him hard and fast. But Briggart's forward motion suddenly stopped cold. My eyes switched back to Johnny and I saw the reason. Johnny was holding a one-shot derringer in his hand, the muzzle pointed straight at Briggart's gut.

"Why don't you keep coming, Briggart?" Johnny asked.

Briggart's anger left him just as quick as it had come. He backed away, a sickly grin sweeping across his face. "Forget it, kid," he said meekly. He shook his hand at the gun in Johnny's fist. "You shouldn't be carrying a thing like that," he said nervously. Then he dug into his vest pocket and tossed a silver dollar at Johnny's feet.

The dollar lay at Johnny's feet, half buried by the deep dust of the street. For a moment Johnny made no move to pick up the coin, then a slight smile swept away the grim expression on his face. Reaching down he picked up the dollar and held it to the light. Johnny laughed lightly. "Think of it, Briggart," he said. "With this dollar you've just paid for your own funeral."

No use saying Briggart wasn't scared right then, he was. He took a couple of quick steps backward, almost falling in his haste to get away. "You're crazy, kid," he said hoarsely. Then he wheeled and ran down the street.

I walked back to where Johnny was sitting and took the derringer out of his hand. A boy his age had no business carrying a gun like that, especially with the thoughts he was thinking.

"Take it, Sheriff," he said, not caring. "I won't need it any more." He held up the silver dollar Briggart had thrown at his feet. "I'm gonna use this, Sheriff. Gonna do it the Cass Briggart way—smart."

I spent the rest of that day and darned near all of the rest trying to figure out the meaning of Johnny's words. That silver dollar stayed on my mind until I was almost beside myself with worry. Then I got to thinking again like a man should. That dollar didn't mean any more than all the thousands of others just like it. Johnny had just been talking wild. I was firmly convinced of that.

The next day I was down at the stable waiting for Pete to bring out my horse when I saw Johnny sitting off to one side. For a busy kid like him I was kind of surprised to see him wasting his time. I pointed to the playing card he held in his hand. "You going to be a gambler, Johnny?" I asked.

Johnny put the cards back in their box, being extra careful not to spoil their newness. He looked up at me, his face dead serious. "Can't say as I am, Sheriff," he said.

I felt there was more to it than Johnny had offered. "Why the cards?" I asked insistently.

Johnny came to his feet, standing small in front of me. He held up the box of cards, plain for me to see. "Just a little plan I've got, Sheriff," he said slowly. He grinned when he saw me frowning back at him. Then he turned and walked away leaving me standing there, my puzzled eyes centered on his retreating back.

SOME of these last parts I'll have to tell the way I heard them, not having been on the actual scene myself. But I'm positive it was all told to me straight, just the way it really was.

There was a big poker game in session down at the saloon. It had started the night before and was still going strong the next afternoon. From what I heard, Johnny was kept right busy running errands for the players.

They say that game was really one to watch. The players at the table were grimly silent, paying no mind to anything except the cards in their hands. There was Bill Nelson, owner of the Bar N and Tom Smith, owner of the Circle S, and also Cass Briggart and the lawyer, Ira Hawks. The latter being a right smart gent who had seen fit to hang his shingle in our town some years before.

Along toward the shank of the afternoon Bill Nelson began to lose steadily, until he was some three thousand in the

hole. Being a hard-working cattleman, Nelson held a suspicious regard for men of Briggart's stripe, who made their living the easy way. Briggart had been winning all the money and that alone did nothing to improve Nelson's temper.

After losing a heavy pot to Briggart, Nelson pushed away from the table, his eyes hard on Briggart's face. "Deal me out for a few hands," he said, getting to his feet. "Maybe when I come back you won't be so lucky, Briggart."

Standing outside of the saloon, I reckon Bill Nelson began to worry about his heavy loss. That's when Johnny came into the picture.

"Bet you're big loser, ain't you, Mr. Nelson?" Johnny said.

Bill Nelson had no patience for idle talk. "Just lousy luck, Johnny." he said gruffly.

"You can call it that if you want to," Johnny replied, meaningly.

Nelson's body ridged with tenseness. "What are you getting at, Johnny?" he demanded.

Johnny's face was full of wiseness. "You're being played for a sucker, Mr. Nelson."

Nelson didn't need much coaxing for his suspicion to go sky-high. "Go on," he said tightly.

"Briggart's cheating you," Johnny said.

Nelson's eyes opened wide. "You're wrong, Johnny."

That knowing look was still on Johnny's face. "Am I, Mr. Nelson?" Then he beckoned the big man down to his own size and whispered in his ear.

"By God!" Nelson exclaimed. He slapped the Colt at his hip with a hard hand. "If that's true he's good as dead."

"Go see for yourself," Johnny urged.

I came by about a minute later, just in time to hear the single shot from inside the saloon. I pulled up short when I saw Johnny standing outside the batwing doors. I held back, wondering at his strange actions. After the roar of the gun he turned and looked toward the hill on the outskirts of town. "That's it, Maw," I heard him say softly. "It's done. Now you can rest in peace."

I pushed past Johnny and made my way into the saloon. The players were on their feet, standing away from the table. But Cass Briggart had made no effort to get up. His body was slumped forward over the green-topped table, the blood from the hole in his forehead turning the green felt dark and ugly.

I got down to the facts of the case quickly. I took Bill Nelson aside and listened to his story. He showed me the marked cards and I knew I didn't have any case against him. Cardsharping comes in the same class as rustling and horse stealing in our town.

I was heading for the door when the real thought hit me with the force of a .45 slug. Bill Nelson had killed the gambler, but he had only been the instrument, dumbly doing the bidding of someone else. I went out that door really bitter inside, because I knew who that someone was.

WE WERE back in my office again, the boy and I sitting across the table from each other. I couldn't see any fear on Johnny's face, no matter how hard I looked.

"Bill Nelson's telling a story about the killing of Cass Briggart," I said pointedly.

Johnny shrugged as if I had been talking about the weather. "Talk, Sheriff, just talk."

I recalled the silver dollar Briggart had thrown to the boy. "How much do playing cards cost, Johnny?" I asked.

"One dollar, Sheriff," he said evenly.

I nodded. "Nelson says you told him the cards in the game were marked, Johnny. Said you told him that Briggart was cheating." I waited for Johnny to say something, but he just smiled thinly. "Tell me about that, son."

Johnny's face never changed. "Just a hunch, Sheriff. I always thought Briggart was a crooked coyote."

That boy was just as cool as snow on the top of a distant mountain. "It was more than just a hunch, Johnny," I said carefully. "You *knew* those cards were marked. You were sent for new cards

just a few minutes before Briggart was killed. You saw your chance and told Bill Nelson they were marked."

I should have left it right there, but I didn't. "I'd almost swear you marked those cards yourself, Johnny," I said.

Johnny's face grew hard. "You could almost swear that Briggart left my maw out in that blizzard too, Sheriff, but you can't prove it."

I felt the push of his words slamming back at me. He had me in a corner of my own doing. I had shown him that there were two ways to interpret the law. He had taken the only course open to his youthful mind. If anyone was guilty of Briggart's death it was me.

I gave Johnny the nod, telling him he could go. I saw his shoulders pull back and I knew he was walking with pride again. People wouldn't whisper when they passed him now, knowing his maw's killer was dead. But who could I face, knowing what I did? I had been responsible for everything that had happened. I couldn't see Johnny going through life thinking about the law the way he did.

"Wait up, Johnny," I said, coming to my feet. When he turned I took off my badge and tossed it on the table. "I'm buying a ranch outside of town and I want you for my partner." I held my eyes hard on Johnny's face. "The law ain't as simple as it used to be, I'm quitting."

Johnny frowned. "Why, Sheriff?"

"Just tired of it all, Johnny," I said. "Too many laws with two sides to them. When I can't do anything about a hombre like Briggart, then it's time to go."

All the hardness left Johnny's face and his smile was one of youthful happiness. The revengeful Johnny was gone if I could just keep it that way. He gave me a slow wink.

"There ain't no smart law that says we can't be partners, is there, Sheriff?" he asked.

Right then I started feeling like a man again. I walked around the table toward the door. I didn't even take a backward look at the twenty years I had spent as a lawman.

"There sure ain't, partner," I said with pride.

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He flattened on the pony's neck, as the sound of a gun echoed up and down the river

AMBUSH TRAIL

By CHARLES A. STEARNS

SOMEWHERE out there in the pitch dark the nightherd was singing

As I went down to the river, poor boy . . .

and Joel Henry Cooper rolled over in his blankets and could not sleep for listening to the noises of the night.

All the way up from Uvalde he had known that Luke Shagg was going to kill him. There wasn't he slightest doubt that Luke could do it, for he was a great, fierce, mountain man, while Joel Henry had never done anything in his life except punch cows. Like most range hands, Joel Henry packed a big .45, cultivated a steely look, and studied to walk like Sam Bass, but it didn't mean a thing. He couldn't hit the side of a barn.

For awhile after Luke came down out of the Guadaloupe Range to work for the

Joel Henry Cooper walked like Sam Bass, but the difference was, Joel Henry couldn't shoot for shucks

Bar L Syndicate, he and Joel Henry had been good friends. Then, one day last winter, Luke had found a notice in an old copy of the Gazette which interested him. It read:

> Miss Annabelle Spiegel, aged 23, of St. Louis will be pleased to correspond with refined western gentleman. Object: friendship.

Luke went straightway and took a bath.

"You've had booklearning," he said to Joel Henry. "Draw me a letter." Luke could read printed words, but handwriting was a mystery to him.

So Joel Henry wrote a letter to Annabelle Spiegel and signed Luke's name to it. Then he wrote a short note on the back, under his own name, explaining that he had written the letter, and not Luke Shagg. He didn't mean to imply that Luke was an ignoramus, but he wanted a little credit for his work.

When Annabelle's answer came—she was a naturally friendly girl and had been writing to at least two dozen cowboys—it had a postscript on the back, addressed to Joel Henry.

Of course when Luke brought the letter around to have it read to him, Joel Henry only rendered unto Luke the part that was Luke's, and the rest he kept to himself. It was a nice, friendly little postscript, and he felt encouraged enough to try again.

This time Annabelle's P. S. was even friendlier, and it got so that her postscripts to Joel Henry were longer than her letters to Luke. Finally she sent along her picture. She was a pretty girl, and Luke showed the picture around the bunkhouse. He thought it was for him.

But Joel Henry Cooper took one look at the picture and knew that she was the woman for him. He asked her to meet him in Abilene when the trail herds came north.

He never had a chance to read her answer because he was away on round-up when the next letter came. Luke got one of the other hands to read it to him—postscript and all.

When Joel Henry got back and heard about it, one look at Luke Shagg's face told him two things. Annabelle's answer had been yes, but he would never live to reach Abilene.

No word had passed between them since that day. Yet the naked hate in Luke's eyes as the trailherd moved north was an oath of vengeance.

And Joel Henry understood that look, with a healthy dread of the moment of their encounter, riding point with only half an eye for the herd. Keeping one hand near his holster. Trying not to doze in the saddle. Now lying in the darkness with his six-shooter in easy reach of his hand.

In a little while the rim of the prairie would catch fire with the first aurora of morning. The traildrivers all slept. All except Joel Henry and the nightherd.

Something had awakened Joel Henry. He didn't know what it was. He held his breath and listened, but there was only the peaceful murmurings of the sleeping cattle, and there was only the Canadian, with hardly a ripple to its treacherous expanse, but making a sucking sound now and then under its south bank to let a man know that it was on the way to the Gulf of Mexico with all that waer. And there was only the nighterd, farther away now, and very lonesome.

> ***Stop thinkin' about that woman you love. Bow down your head and cry, poor boy.***

Joel Henry started to go back to sleep, but there was a tell-tale squeak of springs, the tailflap of the supply wagon, not six feet from where he lay, opened, and a man's head and shoulders appeared.

The man crouched and sprang.

Joel Henry uncoiled like a rattler, knocked his legs from under him, and in a second they were wrestling under the wagon, with no sound except their grunting. Joel Henry got a knee up and went to work with it.

"Quit that, Joel Henry!" an outraged voice cried.

It was only Billy Fazola, one of the outriders.

Billy Fazola was in his late twenties, but he looked even younger than Joel

Henry Cooper, in spite of the fact that he had bat ears, buck teeth, and the sad, but alert, face of a wise old mustang. He looked awkward on the ground, but in the saddle he was a top hand, and he could ride the meanest hammerhead that ever spit out a bit. The only trouble was that he was a thief. He would steal from a saddle to a pair of B.V.D.'s, and since he nearly always got caught, it was hard for him to keep a job. Right this very minute his jaws bulged like a packrat's.

"I might have known it was only you stealing grub," Joel Henry said.

"Have some raisins," said Billy Fazola indistinctly.

"Never mind the raisins. It's nearly daylight. Go and see if the cook has got the coffee hot. Go on—git!"

"You needn't be so proddy," Billy replied, but he left while his number was still up.

WHEN he had gone Joel Henry yanked on his boots in a hurry, grabbed his gunbelt and buckled it around him, and threw his bedroll into the wagon without making it up, which was strictly against the rules. The sky in the east was an angry red, a sure omen of trouble.

He knew in his heart that when the time came, Luke Shagg would get him. All the same he aimed to get saddled up before Luke finished eating breakfast, so that he could keep the herd between them all day.

This morning, however, Luke was already drinking coffee by the cookfire. When he saw Joel Henry his face began to twitch ominously, as usual.

Joel Henry decided to pretend that he wasn't there. He got a tin cup, reached across Luke for the pot, and started to pour his coffee. The cup was shaking and he spilled a little of the boiling coffee into Luke's boot.

It was not more than half a cupful, but Luke seemed to resent it. He sprang to his feet with a bellow.

"Cooper," Luke Shagg said. It was like being hit in the belly when a man was not looking.

Very gently Joel Henry put his hand down to his side as he turned at bay. He frowned slightly. He waggled his fingers. The cool butt of his old Peacemaker was not there to touch.

Plainly somebody had swiped it. Or else he had left it in his bedroll. The only thing that mattered was that it was not in its holster where he would have to use it, and he was thankful enough for that. Luke might beat him up, or cut his ears off, but he wouldn't have the nerve to shoot an unarmed man before witnesses. That was frowned upon by range custom.

What puzzled Joel Henry was why Luke kept backing away from him, eyeing his right hand as if it was a snake.

And all at once, with a sinking feeling, Joel Henry remembered a special problem that had plagued him ever since he'd got to be a man. He didn't have any hips to speak of, and sometimes his gunbelt slipped down.

He took a look. Sure enough, his six-shooter was down there. It was hanging just above his knee—lower even than a professional gunman would wear it.

Joel Henry Cooper assumed the glassy stare of a captured Yankee spy at dawn.

Fortunately Woolhead Smith, the trail-boss, came riding up at this crucial moment.

Woolhead was always in a hurry to get moving, and so he made a practice of getting out early and rawhiding the men through breakfast.

Nobody ever talked back to him. He was only a dirty, weak-eyed old man with bowed legs, baggy britches, and amber-stained whiskers, but he was the trail-boss, and that name carried a lot of weight. All of the hands, including Luke Shagg, were afraid of him.

He saw Joel Henry and Luke bracing each other, and he leaned over and let Luke have it across the seat of the pants with a rope end.

Luke jumped about a foot.

"At it again, I see!" Woolhead roared. "Gol-dang it, I've had enough! I've put up with you two banty roosters for three weeks, and I'm sick of it. Cooper!"

"What'd I do?" Joel Henry wanted to know.

"Shut your damn mouth and listen. Somewhere along the lower Salt Fork there's a buffler crossing. We can save a day if we use it instead of circling to the west. I'm sending you ahead to scout for it. Fork your bronc and head northeast to the mouth of the Fork. You can work upstream."

Well sir, it was so perfect that Joel Henry couldn't believe his ears. When he reached the Salt Fork of the Arkansas he could pretend that he was lost, keep going until he reached Abilene, meet Annabelle, and head for Wyoming.

He felt good. He even felt cocky. He gave Luke Shagg a hard look. "We'll finish this when I get back," he said. That was a safe enough thing to say.

"The hell with you," Woolhead Smith said. "I'm sending Luke up to where the Chikaskia comes in, to work downstream. You can come meeting each other. In case you shoot each other, which I hope, I'm sending Billy Fazola along as a witness. It'll keep him out of mischief, and I'll have a clean outfit for a day or two. I need the peace and quiet."

BILLY FAZOLA squatted in the root hollow of a big cottonwood tree with the firelight flickering upon his homely face, and he was whistling in a nerve-wracking monotone as he watched the mist creep up from the river.

The reason that he was whistling was that he was lonesome. Joel Henry wouldn't talk to him, and he had been having the feeling, all day, that he was not welcome.

He was dead right about that. With him along Joel Henry couldn't very well pretend that he was lost and slip off to Abilene. A couple of times that day Joel Henry had tried to shake him off by riding on ahead, but it was no use. Billy always caught up with him again.

Now it was dark, and he would have to wait until daylight to try it again. This was wild, Arkansas country, and a stranger could get turned around and wander in the wrong direction, or in circles. He might even run smack into Luke Shagg.

There was still no sign of Luke, but that didn't mean that he was not around close. Very likely Luke could see in the dark like a cat. Some said that he was at least a quarter Comanche, and he looked it.

The willows and the cottonwoods made little sighing, ghost sounds even though there was not a breath of wind. Once the horses, hobbled in knee-deep bottom grass, acted spooked. Somewhere upstream a cat owl screamed like a woman.

Billy Fazola stopped whistling. "I don't like it here," he said.

Joel Henry didn't say anything. Since dusk he had been wallowing in gloom and self-pity the way a steer wallows in a blue mud-hole, and he had got to the point where he thought it was all Billy's fault.

By now he was fairly sure that this lonely river bottom, deep in Indian Territory, was going to be his last resting place. Under these tall cottonwoods he would spend eternity without one old friend to shed a tear upon his unmarked grave.

"A body could catch their death of grippe on this here damp river bank," Billy said.

"You ain't hog-tied."

Billy shrugged. He got to his feet deliberately, stuffed his shirt tail in, and picked up his saddle. "I sure wish you would come along, Joel Henry," he said. "I'd feel better about this."

"I hope you get good and lost," Joel Henry told him with a lump in his throat.

If there was anything that he wanted more than anything else in the world, it was to ride out of there with Billy Fazola. But he couldn't do it, and Billy knew he couldn't. He couldn't face Woolhead Smith and the bunch, after making that brag this morning. Besides, it would only put off the showdown for a day or two longer, at the most.

"I expect this is *adios* then," Billy said cheerfully.

"Hold on a minute," Joel Henry said. "There might be a favor you can do for me in case I don't make it to Abilene."

"What's that?"

"Meet Annabelle when she gets off the train."

"That would be a downright pleasure, Joel Henry," Billy said. "It sure would. But, hang it, I ain't going to do it, because Luke Shagg would get mad at me if I did."

"I didn't ask you to comfort her in her bereavement. It's something else. Remember that little spread that I staked out up in the Tres Pinos Hills a couple of years ago?"

"I wouldn't exactly say it was a spread," Billy said. "I would say it was more of a cactus farm."

"All the same, I've been rounding up mavericks in the off season when the Bar L could spare me. Fifty head of prime steers in this trail herd have got my brand on 'em. That's around a thousand dollars in Abilene, if I live to cash in on my percentage of the herd. If I don't, I want you to collect that money for me and give it to Annabelle."

"That's a powerful lot of money," Billy said. "I don't know if Woolhead Smith will give it to me. He don't cotton to me, Joel Henry."

"He'd better. I'm signing over this cattle receipt to you."

WHEN Billy had gone it got very still along the Salt Fork. The shadows were darker; the tall cottonwoods more sombre; the faint whisper of the willows at the water's edge had an eerie sound.

Joel Henry got a lot of driftwood and piled it near his small fire, for the night was chilly, and he didn't intend to shut his eyes for one minute and give Luke Shagg a chance to creep up on him. He took off his boots, however, and his gunbelt, which he laid close at hand. And he took off his yellow silk bandanna and spread it on the damp ground to lay his head on.

The moon was already old in the west, and at last it sank into the bend of the river. Then it was really dark. He identified the chattering of a porcupine once, and the flopping of a fish out in the middle of the river a half hour later.

Then there came a different kind of sound. A faint, metallic click.

Joel Henry dived for the bushes just in time, for in a split second the darkness erupted in thunder and lightning, and lead was being sprayed into the fire, scattering sparks and ashes, and into the ground where he had been lying.

After Joel Henry had covered a dozen yards or so upon his belly, with the eagerness of a blue racer, he realized that he was at the mercy of Luke Shagg, for he had left his gun and his boots behind him. Compared to him, the greenest tenderfoot who ever lived was a regular Kit Carson.

However, since he couldn't very well go back for his gun now, the next best thing was to make for the little meadow where his horse had been grazing at dusk.

There turned out to be a catch to this plan. The mustang was not in the meadow when he got there. It has disappeared. Without hope of finding his horse in the dark, there was only one thing to do, and that was to lie quietly until daylight and hope that Luke would do the same.

The minutes passed like hours; the hours were forever, and when dawn came at last he was stiffer and colder than he had ever been in his life. As soon as there was enough light to see a little, he sat up and looked around him.

There was the mustang, quietly eating huckleberry bushes by the river bank.

It moved freely, and he knew that somebody must have cut the hobbles. Luke Shagg was nowhere in sight.

He whistled softly. The mustang perked up his ears, but showed no inclination to leave his breakfast. Joel Henry had to crawl over and grab the reins, expecting to have his head blown off at any moment.

His saddle was back under the big cottonwood tree along with the rest of his gear, but he sure wasn't going back there. Luke would be waiting for him to do that very thing.

(Turn to page 110)

Pines Publications Inc. proudly acknowledges the Special Award of the Boys' Clubs of America to DENNIS THE MENACE as "the best comic magazine of 1956 for its wholesome interest and entertainment value."

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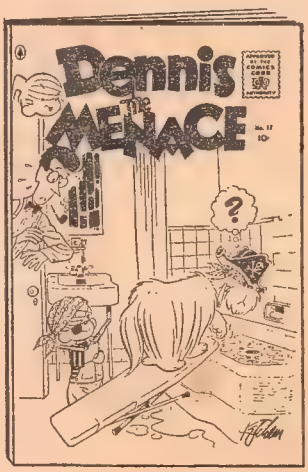

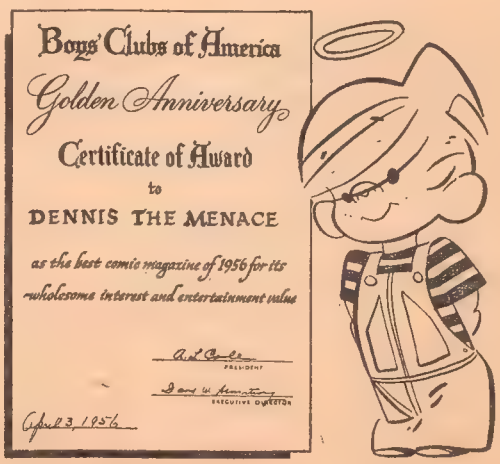

40P

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The safest thing to do was to make it across the Salt Fork and ride hell-for-leather for Abilene. A man could always get another saddle.

So he got his knees clamped around the mustang's ribs and headed him north. "Now when I give you the nudge," he said, "you hit that river belly-whopper and don't stop running until we hit the Canadian border."

Running water was no novelty to the mustang, but he had never learned to like the feel of it. He snorted and balked, trying to talk Joel Henry out of it. When he saw that it wasn't any use, however, he laid back his ears and plunged in bravely. He found it deeper and colder than Texas rivers of his acquaintance, but he came up swimming strongly without getting his ears wet. A good thing it was, too, for Joel Henry Cooper, like most cowboys, couldn't swim a lick.

They made it fine until the willows on the north side were less than twenty-five feet away; then the current took hold of them and swept them downstream to a place where the river had undercut a high bank and there was no climbing out.

The mustang tried to head back for Texas, and Joel Henry was cussing him a little and trying to gentle him around in the right direction when something smacked him in the shoulder like a heavy fist.

Even as he flattened upon the pony's neck, and the sound of a forty-five echoed up and down the river, he glimpsed the horse and rider on the bank above him.

He didn't have more than a few seconds to reflect upon it, for about that time a second slug exploded against his temple.

There was a timeless darkness. The next thing that he knew was that muddy water was closing over his head. He thought that he must be going down for the last time, but something took him by the front of the shirt, bouying him up.

IT TURNED out to be no human hand, but a friendly snag, jutting out from a dead tree that had fallen into the water. He froze on to it, and towed himself toward the bank, where festoons of long, willow roots hung down to the water, making a curtain. Under the roots he could not be seen from above. Then and there he heaved up a pint of brackish water that he had swallowed.

His shoulder throbbed, and there was a blinding hurt above his right eye, but he knew that he had been lucky. He was only creased, and he had been unconscious for no more than a few seconds.

Even now his horse was clambering out of the water a dozen yards downstream.

For the moment he was safe enough, but the current surged about his feet; he felt dizzy and weak, and he was sure that he couldn't hold on for long.

A shower of dirt and pebbles rained into the water less than three feet from his head. A voice said, "Are you down there, Joel Henry?"

There was blood running down his arm, staining the water in a thin, red rivulet. There was a red haze upon his brain, too, and one burning resolution, out of all the things he still didn't understand, kept pounding, with great, colored shoots of pain, against his skull.

"If I ever get out of this alive," he said between clenched teeth, "you better wish you had never been born, Billy Fazola."

Billy Fazola laughed unpleasantly. "I hate to say it, Joel Henry, but this here cattle receipt in my pocket turned out to be your last will and testament. You just naturally ain't going to get out of this alive."

"So that's your game. You've got some fool notion of keeping the money you get for my steers. That money was supposed to go to Annabelle, if I die, and you know it."

"I know it," Billy said, "and you know it, Joel Henry. But they ain't anybody else knows it."

"You're crazy, Billy," Joel Henry said. "You can't get away with this."

"How come?"

Joel Henry didn't have an answer for that.

"I've thought about it real good," Billy Fazola said. "I thought about it last night.

I see it wasn't fair, you having all that money, and fine clothes, and a woman waiting for you in Abilene, and me having nothing in this world but these here patch-seated britches, and this old ragged shirt, and these boots I took off a drunk Mexican once. I see I had to come back and kill you, Joel Henry."

"So it was you tried to bushwhack me last night too."

"I'd a got you, too, if you hadn't jumped," Billy said. "But it didn't make no difference. I knowed you'd cross the river come daylight, and I'd be waiting here when you done it."

"They'll hang you for this, Billy," said Joel Henry.

"No they won't," Billy said. "If they hang anybody, I expect it will be Luke Shagg. Everybody knows that Luke is after your hide."

The end was near. Joel Henry Cooper sensed it in the gradual numbness that was stealing up from his feet in spite of the icy water. In the waves of pain that obscured his vision now and again. In a few minutes his grip would loosen, and he'd slip down into the dark water forevermore.

But Billy Fazola would ride whistling into Abilene, unhindered and unsuspected, collect the money for Joel Henry's steers, and buy a checkered shirt, a fancy pair of boots, or a new knife. For these simple things Billy would sell his soul. This was the maggot in Billy's poor brain that made him a thief and a killer. His conscience wouldn't trick him into giving himself away so long as the jingle of gold in his pocket kept whispering of bright things that he could buy and own, and feel and cherish like the toys of childhood that he had never had. The mad have no conscience.

Joel Henry Cooper understood this now that it was too late. He had been a fool to put temptation into the balance. But it was finished, and he was very tired. He shut his eyes, while the water greedily sucked and murmured around him.

And suddenly someone made a soft whimpering sound.

(Turn page)

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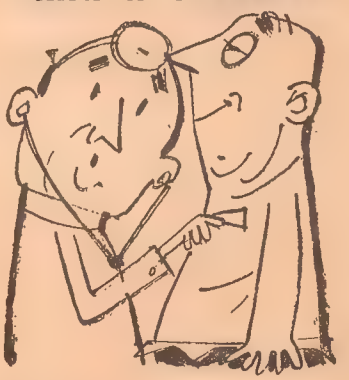

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JOEL HENRY opened his eyes and looked around him. There was nobody upon the face of the water except himself. He knew that the whimper must have come from him.

Now Joel Henry had always been a peaceable, happy-go-lucky waddie, and people mostly liked him, so that in all his life he had never had more than two or three fist fights, not counting free-for-alls, and he had never been in serious trouble until this moment. However, he had always taken it for granted that when the chips were down he'd at least be man enough to cash in his own without whimpering.

He saw that he had been mistaken. For weeks he had been running with his tail between his legs—not merely from Luke Shagg, but from himself as well. For all of the while that he had been blaming Luke, and telling himself that things would be all right if he could make it to Abilene, he had known that it was no good. He could never face Annabelle.

Bow down your head and cry, poor boy.

Yes sir, that's what he was—a crybaby. It disgusted him so that he started to cuss. He ripped out a string of bad words that he didn't even know that he had learned.

Billy Fazola walked over to the edge of the bank and looked down to see what was going on, but he couldn't see Joel Henry, underneath the roots. When he moved away, dirt sifted down upon the water again.

That gave Joel Henry an idea. There might be a chance after all—a very faint chance. He decided to hold on a little longer, and bide his time.

Pretty soon Billy Fazola spoke. "Are you still down there, Joel Henry?"

He kept quiet.

"Don't try to fool me, Joel Henry," Billy said.

A few more seconds passed. A small rock fell into the water with a plopping sound.

Joel Henry peered upward. He could actually see the toes of Billy Fazola's boots now. He eased out from under the roots as quietly as possible, drew himself half out of the water, and got a firm hold on as many of the willow roots as he could grasp. Then he gave a hard yank.

The bank crumbled. Rocks, earth—and Billy Fazola—came tumbling down in a small avalanche.

Billy hit the water flat and went under. A second later he came up with his long, black hair streaming, his mouth gasping like a fish, and his arms flailing the water into foam.

Joel Henry tried to reach him, but he could only get a grip on his neckerchief, which came loose in his hand. He tried again, managed to touch the clawing fingers once; then the current sucked Billy under for good, leaving only a bedraggled black hat floating upon the water.

Joel Henry looked at the neckerchief in his hand. It was bright yellow silk. It was his own bandanna that he had left under the cottonwoods last night.

Luke Shagg came riding along the bank of the Salt Fork with a watchful glint in his green eyes. The early morning sun shone in his face, however, so he was at a considerable disadvantage.

When fifty feet still separated them Joel Henry got to his feet. He had been lying upon a little knoll where the grass was soft and deep, to ease his temple that still ached and his shoulder that was on fire.

"Hold it right there," he said. "That's close enough."

Luke Shagg started in suprise.

"I've been waiting," Joel Henry said. "I'm ready when you are."

Luke took a hard look at the blood that was caked on the back of Joel Henry's hands and around his eye. He looked at the ghastly pale face with its burning eyes, and at the way Joel Henry was standing with his legs apart. He didn't seem too happy.

He opened his mouth to speak.

"Shut up," Joel Henry said. "I'm calling your hand right now. Make your play or you'll never live to have the chance. I've had a bellyful of being hounded by you, you big, lop-eared ridge-runner."

"Now wait a minute, Cooper," Luke

Shagg said. "Let's not be hasty about this. All the way down the Salt Fork I've been thinking about this, and it seems to me that no woman which neither one of us has ever set eyes on is worth shooting each other over."

"Annabelle is," Joel Henry said.

"Well she ain't to me, and I'm ready to call it quits if you are. The hell with her. You can have her."

"You mean that, Luke?" Joel Henry said, overwhelmed.

"Don't get me wrong," Luke Shagg said. "I never backed up from a fair fight yet, and I figure that I can hold my own against any man, Indian style. But I'm no gunfighter. I don't mind saying that I've noticed that you drop your holster several inches when you mean business, the way a lot of gunmen do. I saw I wouldn't have a chance against you."

Joel Henry thought that one over. He looked down and saw that his gunbelt had slipped again.

A peculiar expression stole over his face. Anybody who had ever seen that look would have recognized it as the look of a pale, youngish Sam Bass.

"I'll teach you that trick one of these days," said Joel Henry Cooper. "Come on. It's still a long way to Abilene."

GAMBLER'S RANGE

(Concluded from Page 88)

"Now there," cut in Choto Dufrane, "is an odd coincidence. I was just getting ready to close this place." A corner of his mouth lifted in a wry smile and he stepped back into the saloon's interior.

Hugh Varnum's deliberately casual voice fell into the brief hush. "The Emporium, I hear, just got in a new shipment of clothes from St. Louis. Before you come to the ranch for supper, Gentry, why don't you stop in and look them over?"

"Why," murmured Gentry, "I think I'll do that."

He turned then, seeing Liberty Varnum coming across the street. Her smile was warm and welcoming. Gentry took off his hat and waited for her.

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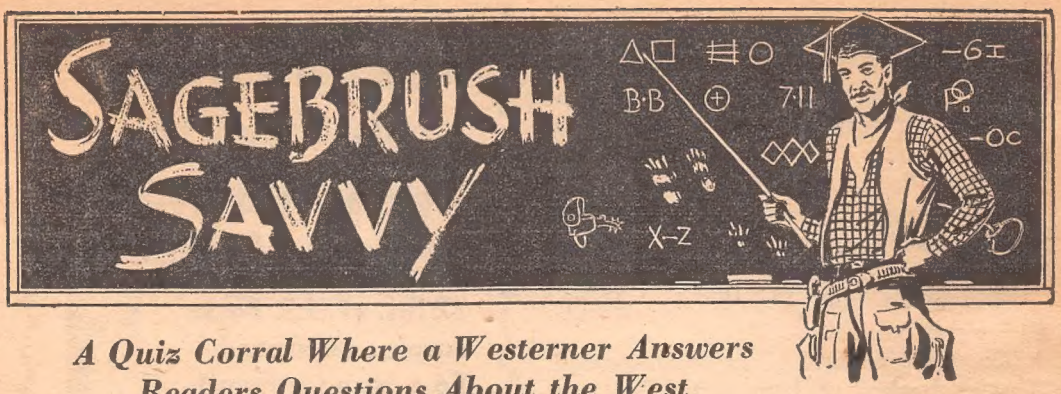

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers Questions About the West

Thanks to the many readers who kindly responded to the request for back issues of TEXAS RANGERS. Your letters have been forwarded to Mr. I. S. (Calif.) who made the request.

Q.—Last summer I visited an Indian Reservation in Wisconsin. My son said they were Menominee Indians. Can you tell me something about this tribe? My son believes there is a movement on foot to open this reservation for hunting and thinks it would be unfair to the last of these Indians.—E.G. (Pa.)

A.—Wisconsin is a little far east for my range, but I'll toss a loop at it anyhow. The early French *voyageurs* called the Menominee tribe "Les Folles Avoines", which sounds like "fish-net oats" to me, but which undoubtedly refers to the wild rice of that region which these Indians called "menominee" and largely depended upon for food. The Menominees are now classed as a civilized tribe. Their present number is about 1,850, which is about what it always has been. They are of Algonquian stock and language, though in early times they went on the warpath against their Algonquian neighbors pretty often. Maybe that wild rice is "wild oats" after all! The Menominees ranged as far west as the Mississippi. I am informed that it is against the policy of the present U.S. Indian Commissioner (Glenn Emmons of Gallup, N. Mex.) to open any Indian Reservations to hunting unless by full consent of the tribe concerned. I trust this will apply to the Menominees.

Q.—Which one of the outlaw Dalton brothers survived to become a law abiding citizen.—H.T.T. (Mo.)

A.—Emmett Dalton was pardoned on July 7th, 1907 after serving nearly 15 years of a life sentence for murder. His brothers Bob and Grat, along with Bill Powers and Dick Broadwell, were killed in the gun battle of Oct. 5th, 1892 which foiled their attempt to rob both banks at Coffeyville, Kans. at the same time. Emmett was shot up pretty bad, but lived not only to serve time in the pen but also later to marry his boyhood sweetheart and live a law abiding life for some 30 years.

Q.—I know that real pearls come from oysters but have heard of some kind of "pearls" being mined in the West. Can you give me any information about this?—C.B. (N.J.).

A.—You probably refer to oolites, commonly called "cave pearls". They are calcite nodules sometimes formed by dripping water in limestone caves and old mine tunnels. They are often seen in the collections of western "rock hounds", but doubtless occur elsewhere, too. I doubt whether they could be classed as even semi-precious stones, although are rather pretty when polished. Some of the best specimens come from an old mine near Las Cruces, N. Mex.

Q.—Are Arabian and Barb horses ever used as cowhorses?—M.W.F. (S.C.)

A.—Yes, but not very often. Quarter Horses and Morgans are the preferred breeds, often with a strain of mustang, which in turn carries a strain of Arabian.

—S. Omar Barker

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